スレイヤーズ

12 覇軍の策動

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ファンタジア文庫

スレイヤーズ 12

覇軍の策動

「まぁたいざこざに巻き込まれてるみてぇだな、あんたら。
——で、いつまで仲良くおんぶしてるつもりだ?」

あんた一体、何をたくらんでるの？
デーモンの群発事件も、あんたのさしがねなんでしょう？」
「答える必要はない！」

SLAYERS

VOL.12: THE MANEUVERINGS OF DYNAST'S ARMY

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By Passing Chance, Tangled Up in the Mazoku's Fate

Darkness came and brought only silence to the City. Even though it was the middle of the night, in a city of this size, some of the taverns were still open, with some of the drunkards still wandering down the nighttime street— Of course, this was normal. If we're only talking about this city, there were no longer any stores open.

...well, clearly it was a dangerous time of day. Naturally, the streets were devoid of people, so I was going on my way all alone. My mantle, the color of darkness, fluttered in the night. I crossed the ground stifling the sound of my footsteps. I'm hurrying on my way all alone. Coming from behind me I heard:

"Going to pick on more bandits again?"

Eek!

Hearing the sudden voice behind me, my body instinctively started to shake. In a panic, I turned around to see who it was.

"H-Hey.... don't sneak up on me like that, Gourry...."

I see. He showed up before I knew it, under the faint moonlight, standing there with a look of disgust on his face. It was Gourry, my traveling companion. A blond beauty, tall, and an ultra-first class swordsman. Up until now that was undisputed. Regrettably, his head was stuffed with seaweed. I feared that by having stealthily slid out of the hotel room, he had caught me escaping and followed me.

“I’m not sneaking up on you. Seriously though, sneaking out of the inn on your own again...”

“By any chance... did you come to steal too?”

“There’s no reason for that.”

The two of us argued at a whisper. Because no matter what, we were still in a town in the middle of the night. Although I would have liked to yell, excessive noise wasn’t a good idea.

“But Gourrrrrrryyyyy~ If I don’t steal, I can’t supplement our traveling expenses, and this bug in my gut won’t let me rest!”

“Are... you still upset because of that?” Gourry spoke to me, his face half stunned.

“That’s right.” I said plainly. He responded by letting out a little sigh.

* * *

“....Let me ask you this... This report is absolutely certain... is it not?” That’s what the old sorcerer’s face and tone said, but in his mind it was probably more like ‘Don’t make such wild exaggerations, girl! Bringing this nonsense in here–!’ or something like that.

This was about ten days ago. I somehow managed to finalize my report detailing the incident that occurred in Crimson Town and submitted it to Telmoord City’s sorcerer’s guild. I had desperately written everything down, ending up with a report five scrolls long. But after only one reading, that’s all the guild elder had to say.

“There’s no mistake, Sir.”

He spoke to me with disappointment, his face a bit troubled.

“Is this... your witness?”

“...”

The moment he asked, I went silent. If there was a live witness to that event— just one, Gourry was the closest thing. Really, he *was* a witness. But Gourry didn’t have the memory power of ordinary vegetable gelatin. My “witness” and companion, in this situation would be stupid enough to say “what happened there?” and I would get the ‘complete liar’ treatment without fail. For a while I thought about it.

“...My traveling companion...Well, the credibility of his testimony is probably pretty weak. It’s like I said in my report: The number of live witnesses is zero.”

“Hm... I see...”

For a short while the sorcerer was silent with disappointment.

“...To tell the truth... I can believe some of it, and by that I mean the real parts... such as the General’s magic sword. However that had to do with the incident that occurred in Bezeld. Your story goes way beyond reason.”

I gave the sorcerer a doubtful look, my forehead turning blue. So much for that. But come to think of it, it was reasonable of him. In this world, the word ‘Mazoku’ carries a strong reputation. When it comes to high ranking Mazoku, the extent of that reputation reaches it’s peak. Naturally, it would require confirmation to be an officially

recorded document. In this case a similar story would have been fine.

At the top of this world's monster race reigns the Dark Lord Shabranigdu, and under him are his five servants, and then just below them, priests and generals. Thus Noble Mazoku society (?) is structured as such. In this world, there are few sorcerers who would think so much about a simple legend. Coming from a practical standpoint, for a while, even I wasn't sure if the tale of the Dark Lord sealed in the Kataart Mountains was fake or not. If the me of that time were to read a report like this from an unknown person, I'd think someone had published it just to make a name for himself. I wouldn't think it was like that. With that in mind, I can say that the old sorcerer's reaction was natural.

I say that but...

That means he's probably pretty angry.

"...Well... at any rate, your report has been received. Really, the Guild has only one petty request and that is Truth. Why, if there is a resolution to a report like this, it will be impossible to commission someone to do it." Within the old sorcerer's words, clearly, the color of sarcasm was mixed in.

* * *

And so I was ordered to make an investigative report of the recent outbreaks of Lesser Demon and Brass Demon hordes. Starting off, I would be heading toward the Kingdom of Dils where the most recent incidents had occurred, as I was instructed by the Guild. Mmm but, just like any Guild commission, the commission fee, mainly because of the labor costs, was dirt cheap. Of course I didn't

want to accept this kind of job.

If it bothers you, you can always decline. The investigation, or should I say 'cause for investigation,' had no leads. And I don't even know how long it's gonna take to get a testimony out of every single person involved. Getting into this stupid, troublesome, incident for the measly commission fee is a mistake in itself. And yet, and yet– I have to. If I had refused so easily they'd say "You aren't afraid of demons, are you? Just as I thought, your report was fake" and things like that. Even though I saw it with my own eyes.

And so, drinking my tears, I took this *fucking awful* commission. Of course, after agreeing to take on the job, I demanded the total commission fee up front. I didn't know how long I'd be able to suffer through this incident without any decent leads if I didn't have money. I just can't live like that.

There, the Guild Elder gave me an introductory essay. If they were to see this, any Guild would give us shelter and food for our journey. Food and lodging was basically payment in kind. However, going from city to city, we weren't limited to Guilds. If anything, the comped meals there were pretty poor quality. We set out for the job and had been traveling until now, gathering information here and there.

The advanced payment that we accepted already quickly disappeared. Under these circumstances it was impossible to do the job while smiling and laughing. So as revenge, I massacred a bandit gang. Er– well, more like I plundered a bandit gang's treasure. I was only trying to replenish my traveling expenses. Who on earth could blame me for that?

"...Hey... getting rid of bandits, well, it's not exactly BAD, and I guess it's kind of your thing, and I wouldn't dare tell you to stop but..."

"My... thing....?" *to someone who acts like an animal*– I took a deep gulp in the middle of my sentence.

"Lina–"

"I know" I said, giving a small nod. On the edge of the surrounding darkness, I could feel an increasing weight. And that's not just because the moon was being obscured. Mixed in with the darkness, there was a certain presence. Hatred, sadness, jealousy, despair— The negative emotions that living things carry, combining with their surroundings, the presence melting into the air— Namely, Evil. This presence was just wafting through the surrounding air, which means...

"...Hey Lina... I get the feeling we're getting mixed up in something crazy again, don't you?" There was a quicker answer to Gourry's complaint.

BOOM!!! The sound of a heavy impact came from a slightly far off place.

"Over there!"

Gourry and I simultaneously broke into a run.

"It's coming from this side—"

"Lina! Over there!"

At the corner of the road we stopped, Gourry pointed right where

I was looking, at the scattering debris in the road. So, that far away presence was— A person?! In a panic we rushed over to find a single collapsed man. His age was probably a little over 20 years. A dark liquid was flowing from his side, glowing red by the light of the moon. I held him up in my arms, glowing in his last moments. A single stroke to one side of his chest had done him in.

"...What on earth..." He was in the midst of murmuring his last words. I felt bloodlust rising up. Gourry stirred.

Clang!

That sound of clashing metal was clearly a blade. I instantly dodged from the side where the sound was coming from. If I changed my line of sight I could see a dark shadow of a person who looked like they could hold their own against Gourry, without letting loose a sword. I say shadow, but it would be more accurate to say that his whole body was black. His body was adorned with light mail and in his right hand he held a black sword. Under the faint moonlight on that pitch black being, I could make out a strange white pattern. He had the appearance of an armed shaman of some suspicious religion. The presence he gave off was unmistakable.

Mazoku.

He appeared out of empty space— but that couldn't be. A nearby building— probably an Inn. The second floor window was smashed outward. This guy must have been staying at the inn when this bastard attacked and killed him, then confirmed the kill by throwing him out the window. Or at least that's what probably happened.

"I have business with that man." With a muffled, awkward,

holding-something-in-your-mouth-like voice he turned in the direction of the fallen man.

“He’s already dead.”

“.....”

When I said that there was a brief moment of silence before he turned his featureless face toward me.

“Already....dead....?” He tilted his head a little bit, as if he was thinking about something. “I see.... he’s dead....” he muttered, followed by another silent neck tilt.

What’s left of his mind seems to work properly... though he is still Mazoku. There was some more of that awkward silence after that. Then he suddenly lifted his face up.

“You’re the only one... who saw me....”

Whoa, wait a minute! I was just passing by! I better object to this quick!

The black Shaman kicked the ground. In one go, he jumped to the side and closed the distance between him and I. He’s fast!

Clang–!

He came to take me down with a side-jump attack, pulling the short-sword from my back, I just narrowly caught the blow and jumped off to the side. This guy’s strong! Clearly in this first round, that one strike wasn’t just a lucky hit. A moment after, if my attack was late, I think he could have easily killed me. If I had completely pulled the sword from my scabbard, I wouldn’t have been able to

catch the weight of his sword and it probably would've mowed straight into my stomach.

When The Shaman received the blow, he understood and yet he didn't, and pulled back his sword. Simultaneously jumping backward and out of the way, he looked over his shoulder to see Gourry following his attack by lunging his sword at him! If he were to attack me again, Gourry would attack from behind, striking a fatal blow to his back. That would be the end-all attack.

Clang!

Gourry's sword repelled him and at the same time, Shaman spun around and struck. Then, by jumping towards Gourry, I put some distance between the Mazoku and I.

"Lina, watch out! This guy's pretty skilled!"

Of course, that went without saying. This time I had already started chanting my spell. That's when Gourry and The Shaman faced off. The Shaman kicked the ground. Brandishing his sword above his head, Gourry slashed forward. But at that moment Gourry hesitated.

He was probably capable of knocking right into The Shaman's stomach. However, by laying into him with that sword, could he really cause a lethal blow to a Mazoku? That doubt brought the slightest hesitation.

Clang!

With his sword hoisted above his head, Gourry was able to stop The Shaman's blow. But at the same time— The Shaman kicked the

ground again! Using the two locked swords as a fulcrum, The Shaman was sent spinning into the air. Jumping high over Gourry's head, and coming right at me! However!

"Fireball!"

KABOOM!!

The attack spell I had chanted made a direct hit and sent our opponent into the sky! Of course, I couldn't kill a Mazoku with that, but the force of my fireball's explosion had sent The Shaman flying way back. Landing quite a ways past Gourry, he turned his face towards me again.

"–hold on!" Shaman looked like he was about to take off. I restrained my voice. "Hey you, you said you were going to kill us. Isn't it bad to leave us witnesses behind?"

Shaman was silent again then tilted his head.

"Indeed... the witnesses.... kill all...."

"Well, wouldn't it be just fine if you ran away? With the sound of the explosion from my spell, people are gonna start gathering here in droves. You're going to have an endless number of witnesses and it's just gonna keep growing!"

Thinking about killing everyone. I thought you would come out and say something like that.

Shaman, as silently as before, kicked the ground very quickly and leapt high into the air, disappearing back into the shattered window.

“Did he just give up....?” Without letting go of his sword Gourry muttered, looking up at the broken window.

KABOOM! From within the room came a huge explosion.

* * *

“...So ...What should we do?” Gourry asked me the next afternoon. We were in the middle of a meal.

“What should we... About what?”

“Yesterday....”

“Shhh–!” I shushed Gourry as he hurriedly stuffed a fried chicken wing into his mouth. I casually glanced over to the table next to us.

“....Your voice is loud.... what would we do if someone overheard?!”

Still stuffing fried chicken into his mouth, chewing and drinking, Gourry somehow picked up on my whispering.

“What we’ll do if someone hears...? But there isn’t anyone who seems particularly evil in here... And it seems like all the officials are still looking for clues about the whole thing. So isn’t it okay to talk about it?”

....huh... At Gourry’s unexpected words I let out a little sigh. He was already aware of such things. Right. Last night we happened across the attack, but afterward Gourry and I had quickly fled the scene. Naturally, the sound of an explosion had called people to the scene, causing an uproar in the surrounding area. Ever since this

morning, the sound of guards bustling about the town has been continuous. Of course, I could come forward honestly and just tell them the particulars.

–but–

"Hey Gourry, if we did that, what do you think would happen?"

"....The officials would help us out."

.....uuuuuuuuggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..... More and more, you just wear on my nerves.

"I *want* to listen to you but... That attacker yesterday, what do you think he was?"

"A Mazoku. Right? He had that kind of presence."

"Probably. That's what I thought too. Well, it was a Mazoku, but it's not like them to use their heads and blow up a room for the sake of destroying evidence. That's what I'm basing it on, anyway. The person he killed yesterday had been asleep when he attacked. Practically, since he was still wearing a nightgown. And then the room he was lodging in was blown up. This way, the victim's identity is probably unknown. Maybe. We could be stupidly honest and tell the officials about what happened yesterday....But if we look at things from an official's standpoint: The explosion at the inn left one unidentifiable body. How would it look if an unfamiliar sorceress with blood-stained clothes and a mercenary, happened along and said 'A Mazoku killed this guy! Then there's a problem. In that situation, what do you think the officials would do?"

"First, they'll thank us for cooperating."

“They will not! If they saw two suspicious people–! Long story short, they’d look at us and say ‘A Mazoku killed him? Don’t be ridiculous! You’re the real culprits!’ and then they’d arrest us on the spot. Then they wouldn’t listen to anything we’d say after that and that would be an appropriate conclusion.”

“I guess so.... but if they realize that there’s a mistake they’d probably let us go.”

At that I waved my finger at him and made a ‘tsk tsk’ sound.

“That would be sweet, wouldn’t it? But in times where people are confronted by difficult situations, they’ll just label any suspicious people as culprits without evidence, and that would solve everything. For that, they’d be soaked with satisfaction. That’s how humans are. I did similar things back in the day, y’know?”

“..... you did what?”

“On that note, how the hell long do you think it would take to make them understand that we aren’t the culprits? Before, with the incident in Solaria, even with this and that the police interview went on forever! ...Oh wait. You don’t remember, do you, Gourry?”

“Yeah... I do....”

At Gourry’s words my face became weary.

“You can’t even remember the name of this city and yet you can remember an endless rambling conversation you once heard?”

Hm, I guess Gourry can remember that far.

“Anyway. Much less this time, but according to the officials,

we're strange. On top of that, the victim's identity is still unknown. Without any clues, if they were to investigate they really wouldn't be able to find any connection between us. But how long do you think that investigation would take?"

"At that, as long as we're honest, we could get away with giving a testimony for yesterday's events. Do you think they'd let us help search? We're suspicious so we'd have to pass their meaningless interrogation, and if they're exhausted, the direction of their search will be skewed... And if that's the case, we'll be a really, really, not good thing for the investigation. But right now while no one knows anything, it would be best if we fled the city!"

"....is that okay...?"

"It's fine!"

Clearly he wasn't getting it.

"Anyway, being affected by this one thing doesn't mean being affected by any more things. It's fine. Okay, Gourry?" At my words Gourry gave a small shrug.

I could tell what he was thinking.

Yesterday before our eyes, that Mazoku... At any rate, eventually we're going to cross paths with him again. Having this kind of connection with a Mazoku, I must have overwhelmingly bad luck. There was a murmur in my heart. I stealthily let out a melancholic sigh.

* * *

"..... a white ....giant.....?" They say it had flown in suddenly, but

the testimonies don't say why. I conspicuously knit my eyebrows.

We had quickly gotten out of that city the next day. Investigating the damage done by the outbreaks of demon hordes, we came to a small village. There we gathered information about what had happened. But when we came to assess the damage, well, the village had barely been scratched. And the people were getting along relatively normally. I see. The village had hired five or six mercenaries to come get rid of the disturbance. But if the villagers were to leave, in the forest to the south, the demons would be lining up.

In a dining hall, over an extravagant meal, we retraced our story to an old man with a face like animal hide, who kept making excessive gestures.

"Those damn demons, I saw 'em since they first started showing up but... No, I'm not afraid of them. I thought they were all killed that one time."

"Then why are there mercenaries here?"

At Gourry's question the old man shook his head side to side.

"There were probably around a hundred demons in this area."

"A hundred?!"

"I don't know how skilled those mercenaries were, but there's no way five or six people could have taken care of it. The demons would come and come, they kicked up a big fuss and then they just disappeared. And it's no wonder I tell ya. Now wonder. Just when we thought we were done for there was all this noise coming from–"

“Was it because that white giant showed up?”

“It seems so. Ah, would it be all right if we added some fried fish?”

“It’s fine. Auntie! Bring us a plate of fried fish, plus 3 plates of the mixed fry, 1 lunch C, and 1 plate of the special salad please!”

“While you’re at it, I’ll have the crown sausage with bacon, potatoes, and eggs and one of each lunch set A through C!”

“Whoa Gourry! Taking advantage of the confusion to get an order in! If it’s come to this, I’ll also add a plate of roast lamb, a fish terrine, and a duck egg soup! Anyway, what is that white giant?”

“...Y-you suddenly became serious again. You have quite the tempo going... Anyway, at the time, there had been more and more demon attacks. Then suddenly there was this bright light coming from all around.”

“A bright light?”

“As I was saying, it’s as if there was something shining. And then the surrounding demons were blown away.”

“Yeah...?”

“Blown away. But there were still a lot of those bastards left alive. But then the surrounding trees burned down, and a short time after the giant was seen, they all left the place.”

“.....”

What kind of reaction should someone as confused as me have had after hearing the old man’s story?

“It was probably about the same size as a small mountain. It’s whole body was pure white.

During the attack it would gleam, shining like that two or three times. And then the demons would be totally destroyed. The demons would fight back with arrows lit on fire, but it had no effect against the giant. But if you ask me this whole, ‘Mountain God’ thing is just crazy talk.”

“I....I see....” I gave a vague reply to the old man’s words.

Lesser demons and Brass demons are the lowest form of Mazoku, but to completely wipe out one hundred of them in a few blows... Half of his story, half the things I heard I just couldn’t believe. *However*— I say it’s not a believable story. And if we went by what Gourry and I heard from other people up until now, it doesn’t sound like a believable story.

But actually, when we came to this village I did see the scorching traces of a battle at the entrance.In the ground there was a large ditch with streaks running from it. The perimeter of the ditch had been melted then solidified. Whatever made it definitely wasn’t human. I was wondering what the hell it was. I wonder, was that the mark left by the giant’s attack? What the hell is that giant....?

“The giant would indicate the appearance of demons, and that story was pretty detailed wasn’t it?”

“A detailed story? You could say that....” The old man had a serious face. “The giant instantly vanished. The other villagers and I could see it far away. You’ll hear the same stories from them. Probably.”

“Hm. Well, what about those bodyguards? I think I’ve heard enough about the giant and how the demons appeared.”

“Didn’t I say? They all fled a while ago. They couldn’t show their faces after all the demons were killed by someone else. There would be no honor in showing your face after that.”

“So then where did they go? You wouldn’t happen to know, would you?”

“Well....perhaps....”

“Perhaps?”

“I heard a rumor that in Gyria city there’s some large-scale bodyguard recruitment happening. Perhaps, you may just find some leads there.”

“Wha–?!” When the name of the city left the Old man’s mouth I instinctively let out a small moan.

* * *

Bright rays of afternoon sun gently enveloped the surrounding landscape. From the forest on my right side I could hear the birds singing. And on the left— Well, from where we were we couldn’t see it, but there was a little stream. We could hear the sound of flowing water. I idly gazed about the peaceful scene, letting out a little sigh.

“Lina? Is something wrong?”

“Wrong? With what?” Gourry walked beside me. In response to his question, I asked another question in an indifferent tone.

“Ever since we left that village you haven’t seemed too happy.”

“Ah ....so that’s it.” I let out one more little sigh as I said it. “The people in the village said so... If we went to Gyria City and waited for the bodyguards to assemble, we just may be able to gather some good information. Or so it seems.”

“That’s.... why is that bothering you?”

“Look, I don’t have any good memories of Gyria City....” I said in a melancholic tone. For quite a number of reasons this is because of a previous incident. But Gourry was just smiling cheerfully.

“What? You weren’t happy because of that? That’s not like you.”

“Because of that... You say that, but it’s because I have bad memories of going to that city, I can’t just cheer up. Secondly–”

“What are you saying? So until now you’ve only been to cities that you’ve had good memories of?”

“...uh...!”

“Right? If you worry about things like that you’ll be depressed your whole life from here on. So don’t worry! Don’t worry!” he said cheerfully while patting me on my shoulder. No, it’s not worth worrying about but... don’t back me up on that one.

“Well, anyway. That’s what the sigh was for–” I caught myself. Gourry stopped suddenly and stood perfectly still, thus cutting off my sentence.

“? What’s wr–”

From behind us, there was a voice. I finally noticed. On the main road coming from my right side—- Within the forest, a faint presence was hanging in the air.

This is–! I thought for a moment. And then the presence came out at me all at once!

Gourry drew his sword while I began chanting a spell. And then, tearing through a green thicket, the black shadow came dancing out. With a slash like infinity, Gourry's sword repelled him. And then, with a great horizontal leap, he stood there in the middle of the road, as if he was trying to block our way.

I knew it. It's this guy.

His real name was unknown, but for my own convenience, I referred to him as "Shaman."

"If you're here.... the witnesses... will multiply...." he said with his awkward tone. Then made a dash straight for Gourry!

Clang!

At that moment their swords collided.

"Gyaaoooooo!" Shaman let out a war cry like an evil bird. Gourry reflexively jumped back. Ten flaming arrows appeared in the sky above where he had been. Those arrows were aimed right for him! He retreated back, with the arrows drawing near, probably to repel them, or maybe cut them down.

At the same time that Shaman had released those arrows, I let loose the spell I had been chanting.

“Zelas Brid!”

A band of light came forward, changing its trajectory to follow my opponent. If I could land a direct hit with this, no one would have to deal with this mid-rank Mazoku anymore.

“Kwuo!!” Shaman roared out again. Simultaneously, a small faint shield of light appeared near Shaman to defend against my spell. However! My band of light could easily smash through that light shield!

I win! Or so I thought. Shaman suddenly warped his body and avoided the blow by a paper-thin margin.

.....eh....?

Temporarily going to extremes, I changed the direction of the light. Again as it headed for Shaman, the light shields appeared again and again, just barely protecting Shaman from the piercing light. By that time, Gourry had already taken care of the flaming arrows and adjusted his stance. As you’d expect, in this situation you can’t just jump into carelessness. With the same action, Shaman spun around two or three more times.

Eventually, with the power of my light band growing weak, and him having to manifest more shields to stop me, this would end in mutual defeat.

No way....

In all honesty, I was scared. Up to now he had kept calm against my technique. And by escaping to the Astral plane, he had been able to evade my attacks. But— his physical attacks combined with a

weak magical defense haven't had any effect against me. Meaning this is just beginning. As it seems, I don't think this is going to be easy. Shaman continuously dodges my close-sweeping band of light.

Bastard! At the time when we first encountered him, I certainly thought he was some some third-rate laughing Mazoku, in a manner of speaking. But it looks like he's going to be quite the troublesome opponent. Shaman's face turned toward me.

"HA!" At the same time, Gourry came rushing in with a yell. Shaman warded him off with a sideways slash. Coming in for an attack, Gourry turned his sword and caught the blow. Shaman realized that with the quick repetition of flaming arrows, and Gourry only using a sword, he could continue to use fatal blows against him.

I didn't get involved. If I awkwardly cast a spell, Gourry would get caught in it. And if I were to suddenly charge with a sword, Shaman should get distracted by my change of skill, or rather, there was a high chance it would be an impediment for Gourry. But that's just thinking negatively and it doesn't settle anything. Somehow, I need to hit him with a spell without involving Gourry–

Done!

Chanting the spell in my mouth, I drew my sword, and made a dash toward Shaman and Gourry. The two sensed my movement and cautiously looked toward me.

"That's crazy! Lina! Stop!"

I ignored Gourry's voice and thrust forward.... just before

changing course, running up behind Gourry and grabbing his flowing hair.

“Wha—?!!”

At the same time, I released my spell.

“Ray Wing!”

Using my boost spell we were able to fly with a high speed take off, steadily leaving Shaman behind. Looking over my shoulder I could see a dumbfounded Shaman running around in a panic, clearly not able to comprehend what had just happened.

“OWOWOWOWOWOWOW! Lina! Are you running away?!”

“No way! If I ran, he’d just follow us!”

We continued our flight for a while. Within 10 minutes we had widened the distance between us and Shaman, so I canceled my spell and we touched down on the ground. Before Gourry could complain about me pulling his hair, I bounced around behind him and jumped on his back.

“...H...Hey....”

I ignored his protest and started chanting a spell.

“....I see...” Finally picking up on my intentions, Gourry turned in the direction of where we left Shaman. Right. By flying away I gave us some distance and earned some time to chant a spell. By clinging to Gourry’s back I could chant a spell while he defended against physical attacks, and at the right time I would let go. This way, if I made a mistake Gourry wouldn’t get hit. And if I fall off his

back when releasing, or if my spell doesn't hit, Gourry could immediately follow with an attack.

There was just one flaw! From close by I could see the figure of something bad! My sense of distance was usually flawless! But by the time Shaman came running within sword reach, I had already completed my spell. With a loud noise, Gourry's sword caught the shining blade. You should always be cautious about firing a spell into an opponent at a point-blank range. I was afraid he would dodge it. I still hadn't released my spell so their swords clashed a second time.

It's not over yet.

Going for a lucky third time. But oh no, *it's not over yet*—

And just as I thought—

"Blam Blazer!" I released my shockwave of blue light at point blank. Shaman readied his sword and ate it head on!

"OOOOOHHHHHHH!" Shaman's scream echoed throughout th area.

Yes!

With a blue light, my attack simultaneously caused a shock as well as spirit damage. By all rights, when fighting a Mazoku it would have practically no effect, but my shot just now was properly boosted. I didn't proceed until the shot defeated him, which of course it should!

...Or so I thought. The light from my spell split in two!

“Wha–?!” I yelled instinctively, forgetting the part about falling off Gourry’s back.

Shaman had prepared his sword in order to split the light. When Shaman raised his voice just now, it probably wasn’t a scream of pain, but an incantation for something. By using his own sword and some sort of power, he was able to slice through my spell. Taking it head on, it should have done some damage. That was proof that Shaman had completely split the blue light. Again, he prepared his sword.

“Damu Brass!”

Hold on a minute.

An offensive spell was released from the side and directly smashed into Shaman’s sword. Shaman immediately jumped out of the way.

“...ch. I missed.”

The direction he had jumped from— within the forest on my right side I could hear a voice. It sounded all too familiar.

“Well now, this must be destiny” I thought out loud.

“Like hell. It’s more like some rotten fate that won’t keep you away from us.” Luke responded swiftly to my comment in a negative tone.

* * *

From the forest, the figures of three people appeared. A man with black hair and the appearance of a soldier: the evil-looking

Luke, and a calm, silver haired woman: Milina. These two had been involved with us before during two particular incidents. The other person looked to be about 20 years old, a black-haired youth, probably also a soldier. He carried a broad sword at his hip. I don't know his face... Wait, let me think... Anyway, more than that— I returned my gaze to Shaman. With his nearly broken sword and the fresh arrival of Luke and friends, he stared back at us.

...I think. He doesn't have eyes so I don't really know for sure.

"I thought it was just an assassin but it seems I was wrong." Luke spoke coldly to Milina while nodding toward Shaman. "Yeah, this guy doesn't have the same presence as a human." he said as he unsheathed his sword and pointed it at Shaman's face. Shaman turned his in Luke's direction.

"Witnesses...increased...?" he murmured from the depths of his soul with curiosity. After a short while he tilted his neck as if to show that he was thinking about something. And with a great jump to the side, he retreated into the forest. By his presence and the sound of the grass moving, I could tell he'd gone pretty far.

"...huh."

"He ran away?!" Luke instinctively raised his voice.

I couldn't tell if he had realized that he was at a disadvantage, or if he understood the situation and didn't know what to do, so he just left us having already caused some mayhem. With the skill that he showed in battle, this looks like it's gonna be just a gap in a two-part action. But how the hell did he think this was a good idea?

For now, the battle's over, so it's okay to think about these things. Luke reached the same conclusion. Returning his sword to its scabbard, he turned toward us.

"So you two, looks like we're caught up in some trouble again....but, first off, I have to ask...."

"If I can explain the situation? Before that, we should stop in a nearby city or town. How does that sound?" At my suggestion, Luke just waved his finger with a tsk-tsk.

"I wanted to ask about something else."

"...about what?"

"It's just... How close do you have to be with someone before they start carrying you around on their back?"

* * *

"But I told you! That was a strategy!"

In a nearby city we stopped at a small restaurant. Pretty much everyone had completed their order already.

"I see. Your strategy was to receive a piggyback. And because of the right conditions, you got to get all cuddly with each other. Ah yes, relationships are nice, aren't they? It's almost like being possessed."

Ever since Luke found us like that, he endlessly continued to tease us, causing my temple to twitch.

"Mm-mm-mm-mm. Quite the persistent man you are."

“Any opponent who can be ridiculed must be thoroughly ridiculed. That’s what I say.”

“It’s not a particularly bad thing, is it? It was just a piggyback. More than that...”

“Shut up, Gourry. My, what a splendid belief. I bet Milina is fed up with it too, am I right?”

“Huh?! W-What are you saying?! You listen here, Milina is always saying ‘I love that sort of thing ¦’ okay?”

“I didn’t say that.” Milina murmured from the side without once changing her facial expression.

“Please look at me more affectionately–!”

“Hey, Lina....”

“I thought I told you to shut up, Gourry. That’s what you’re good for right now.”

“What I’m good for...?”

“Hmph! Anyway Luke, with your one-sided love for Milina, you’re in no place to say such things!”

“W-What did you say!? Well, if it’s come to this let me tell you! Milina and I are....”

“Are what?” That wasn’t from me but from Milina. She dug in coldly from the side, her face emotionless. Luke instantly went silent. Before he could open his mouth in response to that, Milina turned toward me.

“More than that, what was that thing earlier? From his presence he seemed like a Mazoku but...”

She spoke in a somewhat confident tone. Of course, swinging around part of a sword broken by damu brass, Shaman looked like a splendid fool. It was very Un-Mazoku-like. What Milina declared about the Mazoku seemed like a question, as if what she remembered was impossible. However the presence it released was unmistakeable. It’s a characteristic of Mazoku. The synthesis of a human and a Mazoku is a Jinma, and their presence is just as strong, but a bit different. Brass demons release a chilling presence, like a cold hostility. That same feeling is what Shaman released. Well, he certainly isn’t a high-ranking Mazoku but...

“His true identity... Even I don’t really know. If I told you everything... it’s not much but it started the night before last. Ah!” At that moment I automatically raised my voice. I finally understood.

The guy who showed up with Luke and Milina who I hadn’t met before– When I first saw him I felt like I had seen him before. And the reason I had that feeling— his resemblance. He looks just like the guy Shaman killed the other day. Like two peas in a pod, I can’t say why but I get this feeling that they have more in common. Could they have been... brothers...?

“Is something wrong?”

“Ah... No. It’s nothing.” I responded ambiguously to Milina’s suspicion as I brought some currant juice to my mouth. They might just be strangers who resemble each other. And confirmation of that won’t come any later than after their story.

“Anyway, the night before last, we were in a city and this guy– I don’t know his name so I’m calling him Shaman for now but uh, this guy, we happened to spot him at the scene of a murder. Then he kept coming after us and saying “kill witnesses.” And then je blew up the hotel room that the dead guy, who was still in his pajamas, was staying in. I still don’t know who the guy was but I think...” I gave a fleeting glance in the direction of Milina and Luke’s companion.

“This person? He’s our client.” From my look, Milina gave a quick explanatory introduction. Luke added with a nod,

“What a late introduction. This is Jade—- euhhhh.....”

“It’s Codewell. Jade Codewell.” Jade murmured following Luke. There was no courage or ambition in his voice or on his face. It seems like he’s gotten into a serious situation....

“Well, truth is, just now, in the capital of Dils, Gyria City, a strange thing happened. I had gone to notify various Lords, but no one seemed to care. Then we just happened upon each other and talked about our circumstances.”

“–Ho– Hold on a minute.” The sudden circumstances at the beginning of Luke’s story caused me to hurriedly interrupt.

“Is this really okay? Just talking openly about the details of the job? No way you’re planning on forcing us to think for you, are you?”

“Just hear me out. As I was saying before— What was it like a year ago? I heard there was a mysterious fire that broke out in Gyria city. The city and the military was in shambles, if I recall correctly.”

“Yeah... I know quite a bit about it...”

“Recently the city has finally gotten back to normal. But the direction of the military isn’t great. Even if you recruit amateur soldiers and train them to be proficient, it’s gonna take a long time before they’ll be of any use. The quick and easy way of increasing their war potential was this large-scale mercenary recruitment.”

“That’s what you say but, who on earth would do such a thing?” Eating a sandwich as an afternoon snack, Gourry spoke like it was someone else’s problem. He really does have the self-awareness of a mercenary. This guy.

“Anyway, among the mercenaries, in only a short time, one person showed to be significantly outstanding. Gaining favor with the king, this soldier climbed through the ranks without a hitch, and

now it's like that soldier is interfering with the country's affairs. I hear strange things have been happening in the Kingdom since then."

"I guess. So you're saying there's a strong guy with a knack for fighting sucking down all the promotions." I played it straight by using a perfect not-my-problem tone.

...well, I guess it's actually not my problem. But under this person's command the kingdom is in disarray. Wanting to do something about it, well, that's probably what Jade hired them for. I wonder why those Lords would ignore something like this. I guess if you spoke out about it, anyone outside the kingdom would just say 'It's an internal struggle.' In complications, you have to be directly affected. I don't think those Lords are. Naturally, I'd have done the same. But... why would Luke and Milina take on such a troublesome job? Is it just out of curiosity?

As if he were reading my thoughts, Luke said "Well, honestly I was thinking about declining a stressful job like this but I had a little change of heart. I heard that that mercenary climbing through the ranks was a woman by the name of Sherra...."

"Wha.....?!?!" When Luke revealed that name, I instinctively raised my voice.

Once, Gourry and I, along with Luke and Milina, faced a single Mazoku. A subordinate of Dynast Grausherra, a General wielding the magic sword Dulgofa. Her name was Sherra. At the time, in a moment of cleverness, I was able to get rid of her. Of course, there's the possibility that this Sherra happens to be a completely different person with the same name.

However...

Up til now, we had come to be affected by events in cities here and there. Considering the fact that General Sherra was involved in those events behind the scenes, it's only natural to think that this is the same scheming person as all the other times. That being said, this is just insignificant, unfounded speculation. The current trouble in this place is the large outbreaks of demon hordes. Sherra probably isn't in any way participating in that. The time that this incident started happening was practically the same time that Sherra started moving around. So then, what was Sherra's goal for causing those incidents? And now what's she plotting for Gyria City?

"No one really knows what she's up to." Luke indicated Jade with his eyes. Then, in an amused tone he said, "From what I heard about her looks from this guy, it's no mistake. It's 'that' Sherra. I thought their names just happened to be the same. We can assume that her goal isn't simply to climb the ranks. Jade's father, typical of a General, pleaded with the King over and over again, telling him that she was dangerous. But the King just turned a deaf ear. And then, one by one, the men who opposed Sherra started to disappear. When Jade's old man heard about this, he turned to various Lords __"

"He sent messengers to them... and..." At my words Jade gave a sudden nod.

"Every messenger we would send to those lords... would return with letters that said 'I must not intervene in these issues.' That's probably... what it is. From the limited explanation, it seems like a struggle within the royal family. But...that incident is even more....

strange.”

“Strange?” I asked, parroting his words. Mr. Jade looked troubled.

“Yes....but... specifically, the ways in which it’s strange, well... it’s difficult to say in words. Regarding this plot to gain power, how do I say... It just doesn’t smell right.”

“Just doesn’t... smell right? And you have a reasonably good feeling about this?”

“Huh?” Jade responded, not understanding the meaning of what I said. Luke waved his hand in dismissal.

“We’ll explain later. Continue what you were saying.”

“Okay... Other than me, my brother was also supposed to carry Father’s letter somewhere. This time, having no one to travel with in that direction–”

“Brother?” At those words I instinctively looked up. “I mean, other than you, there were people running messages to other places?”

“.....”

Should I have said that? I shouldn’t have said that. He simply resembles a stranger. That’s totally possible.

“...I was just thinking— just stay calm and hear me out, okay? I said earlier that Shaman killed someone... I thought that he sort of resembled you.”

There was a moment of silence. Sensing what I was saying, Jade

looked up silently.

“Ah, of course, this is just a thought! It’s quite possible that this was just a stranger who happened to look like you. There’s a city about one day’s walk south from here... Did you see where he was going? I’m just checking.” After hearing my question, he was silent for a while then slowly shook his head side to side.

“...I didn’t. If that wasn’t my brother, time is not a factor. But if it was... Then I must return to Gyria with assistance immediately.”

“...I see.” I couldn’t find words to respond with, so I answered with only a nod. In the midst of the resulting silence, I felt a tug at the edge of my mantle. I glanced that way, and there I was staring at Gourry.

“...uh, so the plan is....”

Scratching my head, I told him. “It seems like something terrible is happening in Gyria city. We were talking about what would happen if we went.”

“What? If that’s it, you should’ve just said that from the start.” he said with a cheerful smile on his face.

Hm. As I thought, he wasn’t following what we were saying.

“Uh....”

Making a doubtful look at Jade, Luke just waved his hand.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. This guy’s just like that.”

“.....huh.”

“So Lina, are you going? To Gyria city?”

“I’m going.” Hearing all that I did, I couldn’t just ignore it. So I responded plainly to Gourry’s question.

* * *

En route to Gyria city, the mood was so awful that we were able to progress quickly....of course, we would be persistent after what we heard. Continuing along on our journey, we couldn’t forget to hear the townspeople’s stories about all these demon hordes. Well, before we would rush through the testimonies. After all they have a tendency to be pretty vague. Sometimes, we’d hear rumors that the white giant had been seen in the previous village. The giant’s identity, the whole story behind the incidents, in everything, a ‘definitive lead’ was always just part of a story. However the more urgent issue on everyone’s mind–

“But if you say that, that guy won’t be struck down from something like that. ” The words seemed to drip out of Gourry’s mouth.

We were eating a late dinner at a place about four days from Gyria city. In this little city, we ate at the run-of-the-mill combination restaurant-tavern. Since it was a little late for dinner, most of the guests were coming there to drink. The place quickly became crowded with people.

“That bastard— who the hell is he?”

Huh?! Without any apprehension, Luke purposefully ignored my heartfelt thoughtfulness, and returned Gourry’s question with

callousness.

“Look. Before, me and Lina were able to take down that black Mazoku, okay?”

“You called him Shaman right?”

“He didn’t show his skills at all. He didn’t give up, did he?” Milina added insensibly to the conversation.

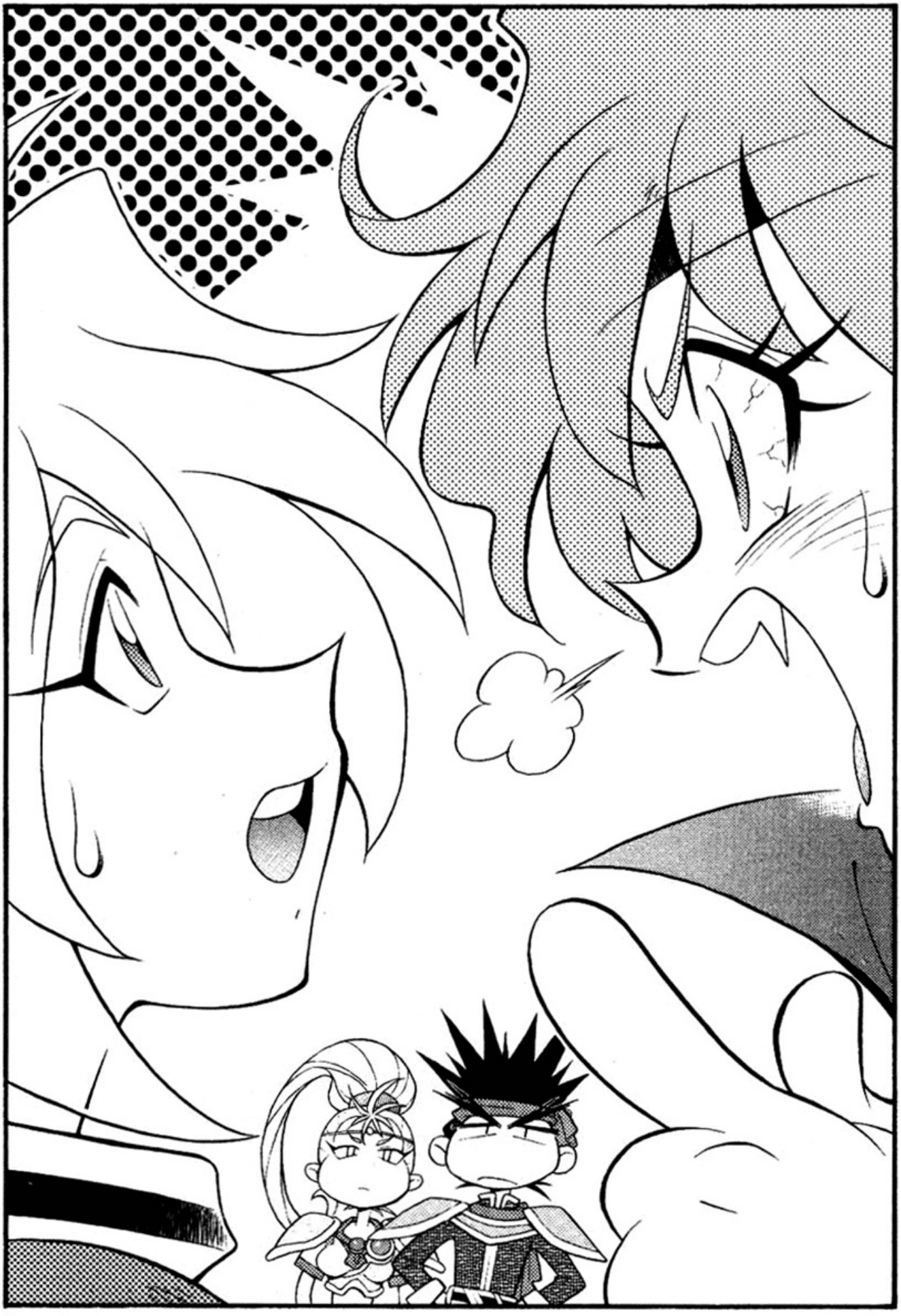
You.... you guys....

“Lina? What do you think?”

“DON’T BRING THAT UP AROUND ME!!!” I instinctivel raised my voice at Gourry. I was met with shocked stares from everyone.

“Wh...what the hell, Lina? All of a sudden...”

“AAAAGHHH!!! Don’t you know anything about the world? Shit...! Generally in this situation, saying ‘that guy can’t beat us’ is just when the opponent comes to attack! That is the divine rule of nature!”



“I.... I guess so....?”

“That *is* so! That’s why I was desperately trying to avoid the subject!”

“Ha! That’s ridiculous. How often does–”

BOOM!

The sound of a distant explosion fell over Luke’s words. With the exception of myself, our party’s eyes lit up.

See what I mean?

* * *

“H-Hey!! Are you shitting me?!” Luke muttered while jumping to his feet. The Tavern door opened with a bang. Scattering into– well, it was less of a scatter and more of a plunge since it was only one guy.

“B-bad news! A group of demons! They’re heading toward the village!” He yelled in a hoarse voice and placed both hands on a nearby table while catching his breath. People stirred. And then it started to get noisy.

BOOM!

The sound of another distant explosion rose up. The demons are coming from that direction?!

“...the hell? Was that one different?”

“What are you doing just sitting there calmly, Gourry?! At any rate we need to take care of it, right? Let’s go!”

Without waiting for my command, Luke and Milina, along with Jade, were already heading for the door. We quickly followed suit but as we were about to run out of the tavern, I saw the three of them had stopped in the doorway, watching the townspeople running about in confusion.

“Eh?! Where are the demons?!” Luke spat, with an irritated voice.

The townspeople were already worked up in a complete panic. This way, the demons were drawing near the city, but I couldn’t tell which way they were coming from. Incidentally, I managed to hear the sound of people being seized coming from one direction. I couldn’t just wait for a more accurate answer. Where that’s concerned...

“Levitation!” someone started casting the spell before me. Using the suspension spell, Milina rose above the roof of the tavern. She circled around, surveying the area, then instantly came down for a landing. From a high place, she could get a full grasp of the situation. It appears she was thinking the same thing.

She landed with a light thump and then saying “This way” she broke into a run. The rest of us followed after her.

“I’m taking the back alleys.” At Milina’s announcement, we avoided the crowds and entered the alley beside her. Nice idea. Cutting through the middle of a crowd of people running around in a panic would not be quick or easy. In a single file line we were able to weave back and forth through the back alleys, completely free of pedestrian traffic.

“...?!”

Milina had stopped suddenly after stepping out into a wide road. I continued to dash out into the street. And there was– no one out there. It was like a completely deserted city, the emptiness stretching as far as we could see.

“Was it really this way? You didn’t just mistake the street—”

“Idiot. You think my Milina made a mistake?” Luke responded to Jade’s question.

“I am not yours.” Milina took advantage of the confusion caused by Luke’s lines and butted in to retort “Certainly there’s no reason for me to have mistaken the streets. And all the commotion just vanished.”

“Ah...!” Realizing what was being said, Jade raised his voice.”

I see.

Up until just a moment ago, we were able to hear the voices of the panicking townspeople. But just now we had stopped hearing it. Since that happened, Jade had been looking around restlessly.

“Wh-What the hell is this?!”

“A magic field.”

“That is so.”

As I answered, an unfamiliar voice followed right after mine.

A Glimpse of a Wriggling Shadow in Gyria

"What the...? That's..." Jade murmured. His eyes pointed in the direction of a thin alley inserted in the middle of the street a little way off.

Surely...

From an outsider's perspective, what appeared there would definitely have been weird. It had the appearance of a man wearing a ripped up black mantle. However, he wasn't human. That much was obvious to everyone. His thin– His freakishly thin body was covered in charcoal-black skin like an old corpse. On his face there was no mouth, nose, ears, or hair. Just two gigantic eyes. You could say they were as big as they could possibly be. Opening his eyes wide, he turned a glance in our direction.

"Pure Mazoku..." I answered in response to Jade's words.

Different from a Lesser Demon or Brass Demon, using its own personal power it can change the form in which it shows up in, as if being possessed by different animals. Naturally that means his true power is much greater than that of a Brass Demon.

"He's using some weird seal to mess with space and trap only us in here."

"Ah! So you know that much!" He said in response to my statement, as if he was impressed by me. That, or he really thought I was an idiot.

"Ah, y'know. For quite a while now I've had to deal with this

kind of thing from time to time. Now, you didn't just come here to chat, did you?"

"I guess not. But it's a pretty trivial task...." The googly-eyed Mazoku's words slid out as he began to walk down the main street. "I was thinking about giving you a little taste of death."

"Step aside, Jade. That ordinary sword won't cut this guy. And be careful. We aren't just fighting him alone."

"You're a very perceptive woman. Guys!"

Guys?

With Googly-Eye's voice, a bloodlust rose up. One was... above me?! Before I could look up, Gourry pulled his sword from its sheath.

Deja Vu.

Clang! Overhead, a solid sound rang out. Without pausing, it landed in the street before us and jumped a second time to widen the distance.

Shaman. Of course he would show up. But I had already anticipated that. But then, one more feeling of bloodlust came from the opposite direction of Googly-Eyes, where it came walking out from an alleyway.

His height was still about the same size as a man. He carried a sword using both hands. His body was completely black like Shaman, but above the neck is what made him ultimately different. This third guy, for one, didn't have a face. Sprouting from the base of the neck, there were five or six segments resembling snake heads,

all about as thick as a child's wrist. So from the neck up, it was like he had a miniature hydra transplanted in him.

"...three of them?!"

As you'd expect, in response to Milina's nervous tone, Googly-Eyes leaked out in a low pitched laugh, "Well, three of us against five low-level humans, that is to say, I find it a little excessive.... but for now those are my orders."

"Orders from Sherra?" at the smoothness of my words, our opponent squinted slightly.

"You son of a bitch... Who the hell are you?"

"*You* don't have any right to ask."

"I don't know how much you know, but as I thought, disposing of you will definitely look good for me!" As he finished he brought down his right hand. A lance of negative energy was released, and it was heading right for us! We instantly scattered to dodge it.

"Gourry! You get Shaman! Luke and Milina, Hydra! I'll take out Googly-Eyes!"

"Don't you tell me what to do!" As Luke was yelling at me, he made a dash for Hydra. Shaman let out a yell as he came in for a slash at Gourry.

As for me–

"My name is Lebifore!" Googly-Eyes raised his voice in anger as he plunged toward me. I chanted a spell inside my mouth.

"Taking me on alone, I admire your courage! But that's a funny

thing to say in this situation!" At the same time he brandished his left hand. A black blade came flying toward me. I dodged to the side as a I released my spell!

"Elmekia Lance!"

"Fool!" Lebifore scattered my attack with one sweep of his left hand. "That sort of thing won't work!"

Making a nervous face, I pulled my sword from my hip while chanting a spell. I closed the distance between us. Even though I had dodged Lebifore's lance, I was now coming straight for his chest with my sword. My attack sank deeply into Lebifore's flank. The Mazoku before me just smiled and squinted.

“Fool! I’ll say it again! That sort of thing–” I cut him off.

“Astral Vine!” My spell enchanted my sword with magic power!

“Gaaaaaahhhhh!” Lebifore screamed and leaped backwards. It should have done some damage, but it wasn’t a one-hit kill.

“Bitch!”

Hurriedly widening the distance, he glared at me, full of hatred. Looks like he finally realized it. From the start, my mundane attacks and troubled expression was all just to lure him into my trap. Lebifore cautiously strengthened his glare. While regulating my position and distance from him, I started chanting a spell.

“Elmekia lance! Luke! Milina!”

I settled my gaze on Lebifore, and released my spell toward Hydra. Luke and Milina immediately avoided the spell that suddenly came flying out. Hydra somehow twisted his body to avoid it, but lost his balance.

“Blam Blazer!”

“Fel za rhed!”

And Hydra was killed in the crossfire of Luke and Milina’s spells.

“...!” Lebifore cast a look full of animosity in my direction.

“Draw back!” As expected, he had realized that they were at a disadvantage and as he called out, he slipped into the alley behind him. Shaman, who’s sword was crossed with Gourry’s, readily turned around at Lebifore’s voice.

“Follow them!”

“We can’t chase them too far.” I said silently in response to Jade’s words. If we were to defeat them in pursuit now, we probably wouldn’t have any trouble in the future but... “This place is part of a magical barrier that he formed. We can’t follow him— if we weren’t tactful about it, he could divide us up and attack us while we’re off guard.”

After that clever scheme we used to fry Hydra just now, Lebifore and his friends aren’t going to be so incompetent.

“...But Lina, if that’s how it is, how do we get out of this place?”

“If Lebifore manages to get away, that’ll probably help. The problem is, after this, we’re going to have a fairly serious fight ahead of us–” I cut off my sentence.

Noise. The noise from the city had returned again. Then in the street devoid of people, human figures suddenly started to reveal themselves. The barrier that Lebifore had formed had apparently dissolved.

“I see. Just as you said.”

“But, things don’t seem to be too calm.” Milina followed Luke’s statement.

If we could see from the eyes of the people coming and going, it would look as if we suddenly appeared. But there wasn’t anyone near us to say anything about it. Right. That said, this really wasn’t the time to be worrying about things like that. We managed to repel Lebifore’s gang but there were still demons heading toward this city,

which means nothing has changed. We started running again, but not from anyone in particular. To escape the crowd, we ran into the street–

"...!"

Before long, we stopped dead in our tracks. Except for us five, there were no longer any people in the area. There were rows of abandoned street stalls lined up in the plaza near the entrance of the city. And when we looked further– Along the main road stretching to the North, there were countless writhing shadows. And shadows, and shadows, and shadows...

"...No way..."

"That's all..." someone murmured as the rest of us stood still. I couldn't say exactly how far away they were, or even how many demons were heading toward us. But it wasn't a little. More than ten or twenty.

"W-What should we do? This... We do this wrong and it'll be worse than those Mazoku just now." Luke muttered, half dumbfounded.

But–

"Okay! We could crush them in a snap out on the main road. We'll just have to settle this quickly before they enter the city!" I said as I began chanting a spell.

Darkness beyond twilight, Crimson beyond blood that flows

Of course I was casting the Dragon Slave! With this it didn't matter how many low ranking demons there were. I could smash the

whole lot in one blow! But just then...

“Hey... What is that? That white...” Gourry said during my pause.

Something shined. And at the same time...

“Wha–?!” I interrupted my spell by instinctively raising my voice. The light we just saw. The surrounding crowd of demons was straight up blown apart.

“What the Hell?!”

“What just happened?!” Luke and Milina screamed simultaneously.

Surely Gourry, with his good vision, was able to see what was happening. Otherwise none of us had any idea.

“It’s going nearer!” I said. I didn’t wait around for the others to respond and took off running. While doing so, the light flashed a second, then a third time. Each time, the crowd of demons would be blown apart. And then...

“...?!”

Being at a loss for words, I stopped dead in my tracks, not sure how far I had run after that. At that point, the demons that had been moving toward us had been reduced to almost nothing. A sound rose up, a light tore open the empty sky, and then the ground was covered with god knows how many demon corpses. What had killed the demons, what produced a light that could bore holes into the very earth—?

“That was...the white... giant?” The words dropped out of my mouth without me even realizing it. When the villagers said it was the size of a small mountain, they must have been over exaggerating. Although it was twice as big as a demon, and that just might count as a giant. It had a shining, almost sparkling, white body. I can’t say the basis for it wasn’t close to human. It’s head was halfway sunken into it’s shoulders, that said, it sort of had the design of a strange white golem.

“Hey Lina... Have we seen that somewhere before?”

“I don’t know. At least I haven’t.” I answered Gourry, partially looking up at the sky. The giant used its right arm to shield its face from the light it had spit out. Using that, it had defeated god knows how many lesser and brass demons. In the area, there wasn’t a single demon left moving. We stood there watching in silent amazement. The giant only turned it’s back and started walking.

“...Le...let’s go.”

No one responded to Luke’s words. I don’t know how we should have reacted. With all the demons being wiped out, there wasn’t exactly any danger. At least, not at the moment. But I wonder if it’s okay to think of it as an ally. Before long, as we were staring–

“Huh?”

Suddenly, and quite literally, the white giant disappeared.

“What was that?! That, just now!?” There was no one who could answer Jade’s question. The piles of spread out demon corpses indicated that this was neither a dream nor a vision.

“Well, there’s no use standing around here. First, let’s go inform the townspeople. For now, it’s over.”

“That’s right. We need to allow the townsfolk some peace of mind first.” Jade nodded in agreement to my proposal.

“Of course, if we walk in looking like we just wiped out a horde of demons, they’ll probably give us a reward!”

“Ooooh! That’s not a bad idea!”

“You can’t do something like that!”

Luke tilted his head and Jade promptly restrained himself.

“First off, we didn’t even do anything! If they rewarded us it would be fraud!”

“You can’t say we didn’t do anything. We properly and attentively kept watch of the giant!”

“You didn’t play any significant role!”

“Heh, you’re turning blue, Jade. In this world, if you take action, you need to be paid for it, even if it doesn’t produce results. That’s what they say.”

“We didn’t take any action! We didn’t participate in the fight at all!”

“Mmmm, you have a comeback for everything...”

“That’s my line!”

With Luke’s and my persuasion, going between sincerity and obstinacy, Jade wasn’t holding his head too high. In fact, he threw a

glance in Gourry and Milina's direction."

"You two! Don't just watch silently! Say something!"

"Something... like what?"

"Well... In this world there aren't only pure things."

"Uwaaaaahhh!!! That's wrooonnnnnnngg!!!!!" Jade grabbed his head.

To begin with, even alongside Milina, asking Gourry for advice was a mistake in itself.

"B-But.... with my pride as a knight of Dils... assisting in this sort of dishonest conduct..." With all of his complaining, I eventually decided that his body must be in need of revitalization.

"I understand! And if that's what you all have to say, then please, do as you like. However! Telling the townspeople the truth as it is–"

"Sleeping."

Thump. Zzzzz.

"O-kay! With that, let us promptly go and inform the townspeople!" Under my sleeping spell, Jade wouldn't be bothering us. Making my announcement, I broke into a run.

* * *

Heading over a hill, we could see the city. Completely encircled by an outer wall, the name of this vast city, the capital of the kingdom of Dils, was Gyria city.

"Finally, I've returned." Looking down on the city from a

distance, Jade's words were deeply emotive. Since the demon attack a while ago, for some reason he was in a bad mood. It seems like standing before his hometown had cheered him up.

"It's bad to estrange people. I don't think you should get caught up in the situation." Next to Jade, the conversely grave Luke interrupted. "At any rate, no matter what you thought of the place before, right now things are crucial."

That's right. Before when we were attacked by Lebifore and Shaman, they were moving under the order of Sherra, who should be in this town. Probably no mistake there. That said, speaking from the opposite end, with soldiers converging in this town, an attack was almost certain. But about Sherra... Even saying that she is a considerably skilled opponent... Getting along until now has been fine but, how do we go about winning against an enemy like her? To put it plainly, I have a feeling it would be wise to run as fast and far away as possible while we don't know anything. And while that's what I'd like to do, it's impossible at this point.

I don't know where she's expecting to go with this, but if a General-class Mazoku is taking direct action for something like taking over a kingdom, this isn't some low-level thing. Even if we turned a blind eye to these events and escaped right now, it doesn't seem likely that things will wrap up nicely in the distant future. And while we can't help coming in late on this, we somehow need to take action.

I can't bring myself to believe that anyone would want to help us, not even an organization. If there was someone who might lend a hand on this, two names came to mind. But one of them was far

away in Saillune. And I don't even know where the other one went. I could track them down and get in contact with them, but I doubt I could do it in time.

Just as I thought, there's no way.

I breathed a little sigh from my chest and along with the other four, I descended from the hill down the path. A straight shot, aiming for Gyria City.

* * *

"There's no excuse. We cannot be defeated by poor judgment." Speaking in low voice, the young soldier, with halberd in hand, obstructed our path. That was the first incident upon reaching the gate of Gyria City.

"H-How can you say that?"

If there was an abrupt response, that was an abrupt response. Jade was half shocked as he said it. But that was from the unreasonable things we were told. Of course, it goes without saying that the outer wall of a municipal fortress is to protect the city from the chance of invaders. But in this case, the invaders from another kingdom was a pack of monsters. Basically, compared to checking every single person who entered and exited the gate, this wasn't that severe. But by unexpectedly tightening up the security here, or if the guards feel the need to increase their strictness, merchants and travelers are going to hate coming here and the city will decline. But in reality, if we could take care of the one soldier on this side, minstrels, merchants, and all sorts of other people could just go stomping and sliding into the middle of the city.

Obviously suspicious people will get searched and be denied access to the city. Thus, fundamentally, in this manner of checking, as long as you have a reason to enter the city, everything's fine. If we seem suspicious to them now, we'll just say "We heard you were recruiting mercenaries" and they'll probably let us pass.

However. With Jade here as a knight of this city, saying "you may not enter" means that...

"How can you say that?! I'll tell you once more! I am Jade Codewell of the Blue Knights of the Royal Palace of Gyria, Second Unit! I left the city on a mission! My four companions are here as my security! Are you displeased by that?!"

At Jade's outburst, the guard responded "Well, I know your social standing... But I can't let you in..."

"What do you mean?"

"I was given... an order..."

"An order?"

"Yes. Lord Jade and his brother Lord Graya..."

"Why?! If there's a problem, tell me clearly!"

"Uh, well, by fleeing without notice, you've not only been expelled from the knighthood but..."

"Wha–?!"

"...upon your return you would not be allowed to enter the city."

Expelled *and* forbidden from entering?! We were close enough

that even we could hear it. How much luckier can a person get? And here I was thinking he'd received the maximum punishment. If you looked toward said person, you could see his immeasurable shock.

"W-Who gave the order?!"

"The one who did this..." The young soldier threw a concerned glance around at the other soldiers. "...The order came from General Alce."

"The one in charge of...!" Jade spat his words out. The soldier spoke as if he was making an excuse.

"Well, he received permission to give the order from His Majesty. I'm just..."

His Majesty, of course being the King.

"I see. Don't worry about it. It isn't your responsibility. If they say I can't enter, there's nothing we can do about it. Instead— I'd like to make a request. I would like you to contact my father, General Grancis Codewell."

"Well... that's..." the soldier's face became grave and he hesitated to speak.

"Why not? This can't also be part of my punishment. There's no reason to order for that."

"No... General Grancis... has passed away. From illness."

"...!"

This time for sure, Jade was at a complete loss for words, standing perfectly still.

* * *

A bar at night tends to be pretty boisterous in itself. This place was thick with the smell of alcohol. The drunks were chatting about all sorts of things and there was the occasional stupid laugh. With all of this going on, our table with the five of us, was the only one with a heavy, sinking stillness.

We were at a tavern on the first floor of an inn in a small city neighboring Gyria. It was strange that there weren't any relatively big cities around the capital. I guess travelers stop here to stretch their legs before continuing to Gyria City, but don't actually stay for very long.

"So what he said..." Luke said as if he was remembering something. All of us had finished eating our dinner for the most part. "What's up with this General Alce? During the day when his name came up, the way you reacted..."

At the question, Jade gulped down a cup of sake.

"He's the general leading the Red Knights– I'm about to say some bad things... You never heard any good rumors about him. He'd do all sorts of foul things just to get ahead. And like a father who took everything too seriously, he met every little thing with antagonism. When the Sherra in question was promoted, he introduced her to His Majesty, or so I heard. For that he was probably in good favor with His Majesty, is what my father said..."

"Hmm... well, after all is said and done, looks like he's just not a good person." Luke said as he bit off a mouthful of fried pork. "Well? What are you gonna do, Jade?"

“What... will I do?” Hearing the question, Jade knit his eyebrows.

“Your father isn’t here anymore, you’ve been expelled from the knighthood, prohibited from entering the city– At this point you don’t have any obligation to this country.”

Agghhh! Asshole! Why would you say something like that?!

“Going off of that. That Sherra girl— If she is somehow connected to the current state of this kingdom, wouldn’t that be a good enough of a reason to stay? Especially if you want to defy danger. More than that, could you honestly say that if you did flee to some other kingdom, it wouldn’t be too early to continue down the road to knighthood? Then how does Zephilia sound? I hear the queen there has a good reputation, wouldn’t you say so?”

“.....”

It was silent for a while after that. Then Jade gulped down the rest of his sake at once.

“No. Because I like this kingdom.”

“I see.” Luke said as he filled Jade’s cup.

“But... there’s... a problem.” he was talking like that because he drank all that sake in one shot. “This time, the timing of when my father died of illness... isn’t it too convenient?”

“...Murder?” At Milina’s soft words, Jade gave a slight nod. Certainly.

Jade’s father and the oppressive General Alce. Those who

promoted Sherra. Having his suspicions, Jade's father sent Jade and his brother out to run messages to nearby Lords. At that time is when he died. Thinking he was a hindrance to their plans, Alce and Sherra must have had him assassinated. I want to be skeptical about that line of thought, but really it's a natural way of thinking. And actually, someone who could have been Jade's brother was killed by Shaman, who seems to be under Sherra's command. It wouldn't be such a mystery if his father met the same fate.

"If it was murder, who did it? I'd like to at least figure out that much. That's what I think."

"I see. So you've decided."

"For now, we need to come up with a strategy."

"That's true. Our current opponent is quite clever..." I nodded in response to Luke's statement.

But then, I didn't think the strategies we were coming up with were reliable enough to win against our enemy. No matter how ridiculously simple her name is, she's still the general of Dynast.

Well, in our company there was once a priest of Greater Beast who possessed power to rival both a priest and general of Chaos Dragon. Having a similar title, I wonder if there will be a case where there is that much of a gap between her power and ours. I mean, even among small fry Mazoku the difference in true strength between the upper and lower divisions is unmistakable. Impulsively plunging in without a strategy, would be straight-up suicide.

"First we need to affirm our fighting power. There are three

people here who can use black magic and shamanistic magic. We're left with Gourry and Jade." Luke looked in Gourry's direction first. "You guys said you were set on finding a magic sword. When we were in Solaria we looked everywhere but... Did you actually find anything there?"

"No, same as you. That sword over there's main property is that it's really good at cutting. It's weirdly strong, but in a good way. If there are any magical properties, they would be catching and repelling. It does seem to do some degree of damage against Mazoku... but I say 'some degree' because as I discovered in our first fight, it can't kill a strong enemy. "

"I see..." Luke thought for a moment. "The one I'm using, it's cutting ability is, well, above average. But it can also absorb one spell."

"Absorb a spell?!"

"Yeah. Usually in battle, it acts like the spell it absorbed. But I'll tell you its bonus effect. It's intended use is that you hit the sword with an Elmekia Lance, then you use it to kill a Mazoku. Done."

"That's not impressive at all!"

"Going off of that, since you're so anxious about it, the spell that gets put into the sword can also be continuously released in it's original form, so you don't have to keep reciting the spell. It's set up so you just have to think 'go' and it will be released. It's perfect for surprise attacks. And if you fire that thing off, you can use it as a regular sword until releasing your next spell. Hm, slicing or firing.

Whichever technique you use primarily, it'll still release a good amount of power. It's weakness is that no matter how strong of a spell it absorbs, it will be released in a straight stream. Also, at some point if it were to absorb a particularly powerful shot, there's the possibility that it would break without absorbing it."

"Hmmm."

"Well, that was a really long preface, but going off of that: between the two swords, which one should we loan to Jade? Of course the other sword will be coming from you, Gourry."

"Oh, I see..."

Looks like the plan is to first even out our team's fighting power. Previously, during Lebifore's attack, Jade didn't have a means of fighting against Mazoku. In the end, all he could really do was watch. From now on, if the number of enemies increases, Jade won't have any way of fighting, and that would be incredibly painful for him.

"Okay then, Jade takes Gourry's sword and Gourry takes Luke's sword. How's that?" At my suggestion, Milina gave a silent nod.

"But... listening to everything you said, it seems like the Mazoku from before won't appear, so..."

While switching the swords, Luke responded to Jade with an instantly cheerful expression."Ah, so you say. I guess I haven't told you yet..." Luke thought for a moment while scratching his cheek. "How do I put this nicely..? The real story is a bit complicated... this plan...is like... I'm just gonna say it. This Sherra we've been talking

about is a Mazoku.”

.....

“...yeah?”

At his straight explanation, Jade’s eyes became little dots. And then some time after that, his voice wore out from all his screaming.

“And so– Yes. She is a Mazoku. So of course if I start to figure out what she’s plotting, Mazoku are going to interfere. That’s about the size of it”

“Size of it...? But when I saw her, I felt like she was just an ordinary woman...”

“I was acquainted with a very powerful one, but he looked just like a human. They like to put on an act and hide any sign of being Mazoku.”

“Huh... So you say...” Jade gave a very vague response to the unbelievable things I said.

“Anyway, First off, we need to infiltrate the city. Jade, you’re going to need to hide some people in your house. Then–” I turned to speak to Luke, but Jade had this unhappy look on his face.

“It’s just... My mother died when I was very young. And now, with my father dead, and my brother and I banished, there’s a good possibility that our assets have been seized.”

“Whaaaat. Well, even so, it’s not like the house itself is gonna disappear. Anyway, getting into the city is our first priority. Tonight, get a good night’s sleep and recoup your strength. Tomorrow, we’ll

begin full-blown mobilization."

We all gave a silent nod in response.

* * *

The noise from the tavern could be heard for quite some distance before fading out, though I'm not sure how far you'd have to go before it did. After only a few hours, it was pointless to remain in the darkness.

"Ugh! I can't sleep!" I shouted and crawled out of bed. It was probably around midnight. At times like this, you have to eat a side of something warm. For that, I could head down to the restaurant and bar on the first floor. Should I go? I probably shouldn't go. Damn... Well, it was hopeless from the start anyway. I put on some clothes and left my hotel room, heading for the restaurant on the first floor. I thought it would have been closed, but there was still a lamp burning inside. There I could see...

"Milina?"

Yep. Sitting alone at a corner table, taking her sake slowly, it was definitely Milina.

“Is something wrong? You’re all alone....Oh, hey mister, is there anything warm to eat?”

“There’s some leftover stew I could warm up...”

“Would you, please?” While my order was cooking, I took a seat in front of Milina. “So you couldn’t sleep, could you?

“Ahh... well...” At my question she gave a half-hearted response while continuing to sip her sake. Very much so. Tomorrow night we’ll be in Gyria City. If we infiltrate the palace all at once, there’s a possibility we’ll have to face Sherra. Since we’re just passing time here, it would probably be better not to do so alone. It gets harder to sleep, let alone relax, when you’re about to pick a fight with a big-shot, General-class Mazoku.

“You say that, but in this situation you wouldn’t exactly be overjoyed, I guess.”

“This situation?”

“Yep. The kind of situation you can only talk to a girl about. Y’know, Milina, Luke is always by your side.”

“And Mr. Gourry is always by yours.”

When she said that I could feel my face sweat. I scratched my nose a little.

“W-Well, that’s... He’s my self-proclaimed guardian. Of course, even though he says that, I’m the one who does all the work. He’s a

free-loader. A leech! ...So anyway! Milina, why is it that you travel with Luke?"

Silently, a smile kind of formed at the edges of her mouth.

"...because I'm clumsy."

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean. Well then...

"Saying that—" In the middle of her sentence— I instantly looked over my shoulder. A gloomy restaurant. The ceiling lamp swinging. A dull barrier— And then everything faded out of existence. In that moment I thought I felt a strange presence. Was I imagining it?

"It's not your imagination."

It's like my mind was being read. Milina rose from her seat to assist me. She took a sword in one hand.

"The shopkeeper isn't here anymore!"

"?!" I looked over in a panic. That's for sure. Until just now I had seen him behind the counter, until his figure, standing there in the kitchen, disappeared.

"Just as I thought."

She nodded at my words.

"Looks like we've been trapped again. It's a magical barrier."

"Oh? You're quite calm about this. Or could it be that you're calm because you've already accepted what's coming?" The low voice echoed through the dimly lit room.

How?! I roughly looked around the area, but our enemy didn't appear. There was a presence though. Definitely.

"Heheheh... You can't see me, can you? This is my first fight with Humans, or something like it. I wonder why Lord Sherra was so cautious around you people..."

That's rough.

Alongside the voice I could hear a sound like falling sand coming from somewhere. From where? The room's... center?

"The lamp?!" At my voice, Milina glanced upward. A dim light formed from the lamp. Almost as if it were leaking from the space in between clouds, a single shaft of light fell on the floor. Before our eyes, hovering in that faint light, a humanoid figure formed. It was like he was covered in luminous moss and on part of his face were two dark empty cavities for eyes, which he opened.

"Isn't this how they look? Humans? I memorized it. I have a name. That name is Gburg, under the command of Lord Dynast General Sherra."

I knew it. Sherra's Mazoku underling! But no matter who's underling he was, it didn't change the fact we needed to kill him. By that–

"Dynast Brass!"

He won't win this one! Even I could beat the luminous moss man, I just couldn't do it standing around waiting. I had already chanted my spell. A gush of magic thunder burst forward and knocked into the white figure. Yes!

“Not yet!” The voice that rose up was Milina’s. Not know the meaning of that, I looked back at the white figure.

“?!” Words failed me.

He opened his eyes and just like that, he sucked the violent rush of magical thunder right into them. And then– Just after the thunder attack disappeared, he looked back at me again. Gburg’s voice made it seem as if he was laughing.

“My eyes pull everything into the void. With these eyes, it’s near impossible to defeat me. Do you understand that?”

Pulls into the void... that’s... almost like the Golden Lord. If Gburg really is that strong, it’s not that strange that he’s working as Sherra’s gofer. But actually, he was just taking the power he received in this distorted space and releasing it in some other space, or something like that. No matter what, it doesn’t change that this is going to be a troublesome opponent.

“Assassins are going for your colleagues in the other space. They’ll die alongside their friends. I have one more power. Let me show you.” As soon as he said it–

Rustling.

Gburg moved something over the floor with his foot.

“?!” When I saw what it was I lost my words. Starting at the white Mazoku’s foot, something that resembled luminous moss spread across the floor. Gburg was extending his body.

Corrosion?!

“By spreading out my body little by little, soon, everything within this space will become corroded. Including you human bastards.” Gburg’s voice echoed as he boasted about his winnings.

At the moment the white corrosion spread out before our eyes. Continuing up the second floor stairs and blocking the path to the door. But of course, while we’re trapped in this barrier, I get the feeling nothing would come of running for the door or the stairs. It could null the effects of a mid level spell, so it was corrosion. Certainly if he was going for average human, that’s not what he accomplished. But I’m not that easy! I started chanting a spell in my mouth, but before I could finish my spell, Milina kicked the floor. She headed for Gburg, pulling her sword from it’s sheath.

Wait, What?! It’s not like she even had time to stop. She thrust her sword into the white moss corroding the floor.

“Fool! It’s futile!” The way Gburg said it meant that it didn’t matter how much damage we inflicted on the moss. Not that that mattered to Milina, who began to raise her sword. In a rush, Milina pulled her sword out of the floor, a string of white moss hanging off of it, as if it was tied to the moss on the floor. Milina continued to raise her sword. Like this, Milina would completely miss. That’s what I thought at the time.

Milina kicked the ground again. This time she made a great leap and pierced her sword into Gburg’s eye. It’s no use–

Gburg was probably thinking the same thing as me. But there wasn’t any time for that to be vocalized.

“Elmekia Flame!” The point-blank attack enveloped Gburg’s

body. I get it!

“Ga..?!” Gburg let out a short scream.

C*rack.*

Milina’s feet made a strong sound as she landed. And then:

Crack. Cr-crack.crack.... Small intermittent sounds overlapped each other–

CRASH!!

With a sound like shattering crystal, Gburg’s body smashed apart. Yep. You got him, Milina. She had purposefully wrapped his body around her own sword, and then stabbed it into his eye. If she were to hit him there with an attack spell—

That way, if he were to to be hit somewhere that wasn’t affected by spells, in his eye for example, when he sucks that spell into unknown space, he’d also be pulling in part of his body. As to be expected, that spell would then cause damage to the part of the body that was absorbed. Long story short, Milina thought up a plan to harm Gburg that didn’t involve hitting him with spells. He had probably intended to instill fear in us, but by going on and on, Gburg had only weakened his own ability and done harm only to himself. I hadn’t been the most active participant but...

Milina turned and looked at me.

“What’s wrong? You look disappointed.”

It’s just... well... I was going to use my blade of darkness– the Ragna Blade, to slice through him, then say something like “How do

you like it? This is what the void really tastes like!" ...But it's fine. No big deal.

"Uh... it's nothing. Nothing at all..." Saying it in that voice, even I would say it sounded a little depressing. For now, I pulled myself together and shifted my gaze.

"The barrier hasn't been undone yet?" Milina heard me and turned in the direction of my gaze.

The kitchen on the other side of the counter was still unmanned.

"Do you think someone else is holding the barrier up?"

I nodded in response to Milina's question."He said he was sending assassins to take out the others, the bastard. Let's go, Milina!" We both nodded and broke into a run toward the stairs.

"Just a second, Miss!"

Thrown at our backs was the voice of the shopkeeper.

Huh?

Just as we turned around the figure of an old man appeared from the kitchen. In his hands was one bowl of stew.

"Your stew is done."

Milina and I exchanged glances. That means... the barrier is broken?

"Milina!" Luke had yelled suddenly from the top of the stairs.

Oh. Looks like he's safe. What about the other two? I felt a bit relieved but before I could say anything, Luke went tearing down the

stairs and hugged Milina

.....um.....guys.....?

“Wai– Luke...”

“Thank god you’re safe, Milina...”

“Ah... well...”

“You aren’t hurt?”

“I’m not, but...”

“Ah, it’s good to be young. But you should do stuff like that in your own room.” At the old shopkeeper’s words, Luke finally calmed down and let go of Milina.

“Ah! Sorry for that just now...”

“It wasn’t ‘just now.’ More than that, what about the other two?”

“M-More than that...? Oh. Yeah. They’re safe.”

“Hey, Lina.” Just like he had been waiting for those words, Gourry along with Jade peaked down at me over the upstairs banister. “See, I knew she was safe.”

You knew I was safe...You don’t have to say it so confidently. Just once, you could be a little more worried. Some self-proclaimed bodyguard you are....Well, not so worried that you suddenly hug me, because that would be embarrassing.

“A Mazoku was here. But it wasn’t that Lebifore guy. How about you guys?”

“There were two. Mr. Luke and Mr. Gourry defeated one of them

but the other disappeared. Just like here, Lebifore wasn't with them." Jade answered my question.

Lebifore wasn't here, which means he's still damaged from when I attacked him previously, and so he opted out of this round. Or...

"Hmm... that means it's possible that they'll attack again."

"Again? In the middle of the night?"

I nodded at Luke's inquiry.

"That's right. Because not all of our enemies have come yet. If they were serious, there's a high chance they would attack in waves. That way, they could hit us when we're exhausted, right? It's been bothering me that Lebifore didn't show up during this attack. Perhaps– Certainly, he'll be in the second wave, don't you think? If so, I think the best plan right now is to move rather than wait for them."

"Move? You can't mean now?!"

"Just like she said." Milina, who hadn't said anything until then, came in at the very end. I nodded. Basically, we're making a decisive action to infiltrate Gyria City. Milina and I traded a small glance, then nodded shortly after.

"I am also in favor of this!" Jade added from across the railing.

"Okay! It's decided! Well then, without any interruptions—"

"Wait a minute!"

I looked over my shoulder toward the abrupt voice that called to me. And then I remembered. The old shopkeeper was still there.

“You’re so long-winded... Your stew’s done.”

* * *

“Let’s Hurry, guys.”

“You don’t get to say that!” Luke replied to my words of encouragement with an unpleasant shout. Back at the inn– We ate our stew, packed our belongings, cleared our minds, and vacated the inn. Now, in the night, we headed down the main road, a straight shot to Gyria City.

“Seriously! With everything that’s going on, you don’t get to just finish eating!”

“The hell did you say?! I’m not gonna leave leftovers of food that’s just been prepared!”

“More than that, is this okay? Taking the main road? If any enemies do come after us tonight, they’ll see us.” Jade interrupted my quarrel with Luke with a question from the side.

“That’s probably nothing to worry about. Those guys are pure Mazoku. They can cross through space in one bound and appear out of thin air. For their plan, the one that ran from the inn would suddenly– how, I know not– appear wherever Sherra is. If the second wave attacks, they’ll just suddenly appear at the inn. Eventually, when that time comes, we’ll be under their radar out on this road.”

I continued my explanation as the faint moonlight shined down on the main road. In the cool night wind, my voice poured out. “Those Mazoku are extremely confident in their own abilities. They think we don’t amount to anything because we’re human. If that’s all

they'll give us, then it'll be their downfall. That's right. It'll take about the same amount of work to catch up with a moving opponent as it would to kill an ordinary human."

"They can... cross space?" Jade said in a tone that sounded half-doubtful, half convinced. Well, I said "cross through space" but I realize that for someone who hasn't actually seen it happen, it doesn't really make much sense.

"Crossing space... you say, but I think they could just be moving really fast, but... if that's true then I have a feeling the attacks up til now have had a pretty big gap between them..."

"Yeah..."

What he's saying– From the time we were attacked by Shaman on the main road, to the time we were attacked by Lebifore, to tonight's attack– that spans over a few days. If we assume that they are reading our moves on our way to Gyria city, based on the tempo of their attacks, I have a feeling they'll show up quite a bit later.

"Well, aren't you supposed to have variety in your life? Anyway, Let's hurry. To Gyria City."

"You said that already."

Our party arrived at Gyria City, fortunately, before dawn had come....but I'm tired. Taking advantage of the darkness, we used levitation to climb the wall from the sky. We slipped past the lookout's eyes and entered the city without any difficulty....I am really, really tired. After that we would hide out at Jade's house, first-and-foremost, getting some sleep. Then, once dawn broke we

would find a new base. That was was the plan anyway.

“Your house... isn’t here...”

“S-So... it seems...”

Luke let out a dumbfounded mumble. Jade stood there completely still and in a daze. He nodded a little. His house had been transformed into a vast field of rubble. A little while before, there had probably stood a prominent estate. I think.

It was a wide plot of land, and though I couldn’t see very well, it appeared that the garden had been properly maintained. It’s just that the main house wasn’t there. Hmm... I think Jade said that his family assets had been seized– Don’t tell me that meant destroying his house.

“So... what do we do?” Gourry’s question, mixed with a yawn, brought me back to my senses.

“Right....! That’s right! We haven’t even gotten started! So anyway....!”

.....

“Anyway?” Luke prompted me to continue after I had left a long pause of silence. I had no trouble starting that but I couldn’t think of the rest.... I... Auugghhh!!! My brain can’t function when I’m this tired!

“Anyway– Let’s migrate elsewhere. Jade, isn’t there somewhere around here we could hide people?”

“I-I really don’t know if there is another place like that...”

“Well then, why don’t we just walk around while we look...?” I said it without stating a direction and began to walk randomly. Heheh! I think I can get a little sleep like this. I may not be able to lay down, but I will sleep!

“How about an inn out in the suburbs?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know of any.”

Luke, Jade and I had a conversation, and in order not to take up too much time, we continued wandering down the streets in a group. The light from the east grew brighter. Ah. The sun’s rising. Bustling about in the roadside, little by little, the figures of people began to appear. People on their way to stock up at the shops, children who naturally get up too early for no reason, guards patrolling the city.

..... *Guards?*

“Hey over there!”

They mobilized before I could sort things out in my head. The soldiers threw their voices and their glares upon us. There were five or six of them in their party. They compromised by singling out one person in our group.

“You! You’re Jade Codewell!”

“I certainly am.” Jade puffed out his chest and replied plainly. Ahhh! Is this guy’s brain not working either?

“I knew it! You are violating your banishment. By being in this city–” Of course this time, he couldn’t finish what he was saying.

“Everyone Run!” I said as I dashed away. The other four

followed in panic.

"Hey! Wait!" That of course came from the guards chasing us.

We ran down a random street and turned into an alleyway.

"Diem Wing!"

Whoosh!

"Whah!"

"Ugh!"

At the end of the line, Luke released a wind spell, stopping the soldiers with all their heavy equipment dead in their tracks. This way we could continue our escape. When I looked back, I couldn't see the soldiers at all. Yes! We lost 'em! I thought for a moment.

Fweeeeeeee!!!

A high pitched sound echoed out. A whistle to call for more soldiers?! This is bad! More of them are coming! If they had been Mazoku I could destroy them one by one and no one would complain. Our enemies this time were just people following orders. As you'd expect, there was a reason I couldn't just blast through them. But of course we couldn't keep running like this. Where are we running anyway?

"This way!"

Huh?

Suddenly I could hear a voice coming from the shadow of a building. We all turned to see a young man beckoning to us.

“Lord Jade! This way!”

“You’re–!”

“Hurry!”

Prompted by Jade, our party followed him. We ran down to the end of the alley where we climbed an emergency staircase.

“Here.”

Before long, we had been guided to a single room on the second floor of a new building. For six people, or for any number of people, it was narrow, so I don’t need to say how luxurious a place it was. I first breathed a sigh of relief, then indicated the youth with my eyes as I turned to Jade.

“This guy an acquaintance of yours?”

At my question Jade let out a strained little laugh.

“Not really. Didn’t you meet him yesterday? At the entrance to the city.”

“The entrance to the....”

Ah?!

“That one gatekeeper!”

“That one... My name is Maius.” At my response Maius also gave a strained laugh.

“...Who is he?”

“That one guy! Look! Yesterday when we came to the city, he was the one who was all “just following orders” and turned us away!

That plain-faced guard!" I answered Gourry's question.

"No, um... if you could word that a little differently..." for some reason he was grumbling.

"But why us? Why was I ordered to be exiled?"

Maius lowered his voice and responded to Jade's question.

"I was definitely given the order. I'm just an expendable soldier. It's not like there was anyone else there. Speaking from an honest place... In spite of myself, I just can't agree with what General Alce is doing." At that he let out a breath, "The female mercenary that was promoted... I wanted to like her, but then I heard the news of your father, General Grancis Codewell's death of illness, after he had opposed her. Honestly... That..."

"Murder?"

Maius nodded at Jade.

"Yes. That's what I thought. Those kind of rumors have been flitting around town. If that's true... then this kingdom is not doing it's duty! Lord Jade, I would like to accept the blame in order for you to uncover the truth."

"Way to rely on others to–" Milina hurriedly covered Luke's mouth with her hand.

Well, maybe he was kind of relying on others to further his own objective, but just helping us to find shelter is about a million times better than doing absolutely nothing. Not seeming to realize what Luke was muttering, Jade continued.

“But... is that okay? It wouldn’t trouble your family?”

“No, I’m from another town. I came to this city because I wanted to become a knight. Properly helping in this country– my trouble doesn’t matter, if there is hardship here.”

“I understand! Your dream– It’s not futile! Surely if we can uncover the conspiracy of General Alce and the mercenary, Sherra, you will show that you can protect this kingdom! Even if your knighthood is revoked, you must not forget the pride in a knight’s soul! With a knight’s pride in our souls, we can protect the kingdom!”

“Lord Jade! You are the very model of knighthood!”

“Calling someone as inexperienced as me ‘the very model of knighthood’ is a little excessive. To begin with, a true knight is...” The two were completely immersed in all the world’s tales of knighthood.”

“For now, we should probably get some sleep.”

“I guess so...”

“Oh. Yeah, you can lay down somewhere over there, er something.”

“.....”

We left Maius and Jade off in their faraway world. The rest of us were able to lay down as we pleased.

* * *

That day we began our services. We slipped out into the city

under the curtain of night. Since we woke up in the middle of the day, we had been planning what to do, discussing this and that. Eventually we decided how to go about doing things. Namely: infiltrate the castle. Find Sherra. Kick her ass.

If the castle had been smaller, Jade would already know how to get in and which forces were where, or where Sherra was. But of course he wouldn't know that. It's going to take time to find the location we need. If we take our time, there's no limit to reliable information we could gather. But if we do take our time, Sherra will be able to gather her forces, with our anxiety over finding her growing. It's the one flaw in an otherwise reliable plan. And so our method would be– swiftness! It's a mostly desperate, almost reckless method, but we couldn't go with the element of surprise.

Maius was the only one staying behind so our party consisted of me and Gourry, Luke and Milina, and then Jade. The five of us proceeded toward the castle in the night. A slender moon hung in the night sky, it's light falling on the world below. The pitch black stone wall of the castle stood still before us.

"Well then. Shall we go do this?" At Luke's words we all nodded.

Luke, Milina, and I all began chanting our spells. I paired with Gourry while Jade paired with Luke, and by using levitation we floated into the air toward the castle. First we would head for the guest quarters. As expected, Jade only had a rough idea of the facility's layout. Our party moved forward in the direction he pointed out. Of course, it wouldn't just end with Sherra being there. If she was, I wonder if that would count as a success, since we were

moving based on a half-hearted prediction. Well, maybe when we arrive at the spot we can put the screws on a watchman until he gives us Sherra's actual location. I think that's a valid approach. Eventually our party alighted down on the roof of the guest lodging.

"Okay. So how do we get in?"

"You don't need to worry about getting in."

...?!

An answer came in response to Luke's question, but it didn't come from any of us. We all looked up to where the voice had come from. There, a single shadow floated at the same height as the sliver of the moon.

Mazoku.

The Flames of Battle Climb from the Castle at Night

"Where was a blackish kite-like thing, about the same size as a human. He didn't really give off a profound impression with his semi-transparent triangular body, which, when you looked at it, you could see the moonlight shining through. His... head? ...was unusually realistic. He opened his only eye. He didn't have hands or feet– kind of a fun design actually. Looking like that, I figured we could settle this before you could even say the word 'fun.' However in our current situation we had a few different disadvantages. First of all, where we stood was a problem in itself. If you looked down into the garden below, you could see soldiers here and there. The Mazoku in front of us didn't need to trap us in a barrier. His objective was clear. All we had to do was use some flashy spells and the soldiers would come after us in droves. That's about the size of it.

...Wait a second...

"I heard from Lord Sherra that you're an opponent I shouldn't be careless with." The Mazoku turned his only eye in my direction. "Lina Inverse. You're the girl who caused the death of Lord Hellmaster Phibrizzo, aren't you?"

"EHH?!"

Of course, that scream of astonishment came from Luke, Milina, and Jade. Well, that little matter was kind of self-destructive on Hellmaster's part but... Maybe I shouldn't tell them the reason

behind all of that.

The Mazoku ignored us and kept talking. “It’s quite the unbelievable story. But there’s no reason for Lord Sherra to lie about something like that. And after hearing it, there’s no reason for me to be careless here.”

The ghastly voiced kite served his purpose well. What a colossal idiot.

“Damu Bras!”

While this guy was rambling on, I had already finished reciting my spell: a boosted Damu Brass. He was going on saying “I won’t be careless” and I was here just chanting my spell. Chatting away is just proof that you are careless. You’d think this spell alone probably wouldn’t kill him. But of course I was fully aware of that! I wasn’t aiming for the Mazoku!

CRACK!

A loud cracking sound came from beneath us. That’s right. My target, where that sound was coming from, was our foothold. Namely, the roof. The Mazoku opened his eye in shock. He didn’t think I’d aim for where I was standing. His cries of shock were probably drowned out by the sound of the impact. Of course, knowing all this, it will be inexcusable when I let everyone get hurt in the fall.

“Levitation!” Luke and Milina simultaneously put their spell into operation.

We landed gently in the top floor corridor, in a mountain of

rubble. I had no idea that the others were planning on casting a spell after me, but if this is the outcome then everything turned out great!

"Let's go guys!" I said as I took off down the hall. "Jade! Hide your face with a towel or something!"

"Why...?"

"It's fine! Hurry up!"

As we were running, a door opened up in our path. There was a plump man with a relatively thin face looking very surprised. Of course, if he was lodging in this building he had to be someone important. In that case, I can't not make use of him!

"What on earth...?" The old man spoke up before I could say anything.

"Intruders! Please run, sir!" Saying this, I took the old man by the arm and forcibly pulled him in the direction of the stairs.

"Wha–? Intruders?! Then who are–?!"

"We're allies! Under order of the kingdom, our duty is to protect people from the shadows. Now hurry!"

"I-I understand!" The poor trembling old-man readily went along with my vague little lie. And so our party, with the old man there for show, ran down the hall and descended the stairs. Of course in doing so we happened upon a party of soldiers.

"Intruders! Up ahead! Hurry!"

Before our opponents could challenge our identities, a voice spoke up from among us. Instantly the soldiers' faces were colored

with confusion. They probably recognize this old man. The old man and his unidentified companions... They probably believed we were escorting him to safety. The only problem was that no one knew who the hell we were.

“Who are these people?!”

The old man said with complete confidence “Do not worry! These are servants of the kingdom! Now hurry!”

“Yes, sir!”

At his confident tone of voice, the soldiers went back to running again. These days, they’ve gotten so used to seeing mercenaries that maybe we didn’t look that out of place after all.

“Wait!” Another voice came from among us and called at the soldiers. “Without speaking too quickly, where is Lord Sherra?”

“I think she’s probably in the north tower...”

“Understood! We shall inform her of what has happened here.”

God forbid they ask what we would inform her of. The words just fell out of my mouth. They were just lines that I thought up on the spot. Phew. In times of chaos you can easily lead people around by the nose. At the time when we found the black Mazoku above the roof, I was following the number one rule of invasion. That is, if you’re going to invade, you need to do so with utmost secrecy. If that’s no good, then you need to make as much mayhem as possible. But using this method there was a good chance that we’d run into someone who recognized Jade, so we kept his face hidden. This way, the five of us and the old man, repeated the same scenario god

knows how many times. Eventually we made it outside the building.

“Let’s hurry to that detached building!”

Hurrying the old man along by his back, our party proceeded straight toward the north tower. By the way, the direction was silently pointed out by Jade. But we wouldn’t be able to go much farther.

“You bastards!” He hadn’t said anything until now, but it was the Mazoku from the roof. “How dare you fools—”

Stupid me, I hadn’t started reciting a spell til now. Pointing at the Mazoku in front of me, in one voice– in one very loud voice...

“INTRUDER!”

“What?!”

“Where?! Where?!”

“There! Right over here!”

“That’s weird!”

Just as I screamed, soldiers came clamoring and herding together.

“Use your arrows!”

“No! He’s Mazoku! Call for the imperial sorcerers!”

“Wh– Hey— Wait...!” As the soldiers I had so cleverly made use of were heading toward him, from behind him...

“Fel Za Rhed!”

“Ga–?!” The instant he received the warning, Luke and Milina’s

simultaneous attack blasted him away. Heh. Third rate.

“There’s still one left above the building! Hurry!”

“Understood!” Easily believing my random speech, the soldiers took off running.

“All right! This way!” Urging on the others, we continued our route to the north. After making sure none of the surrounding guards were looking...

“Ha!”

“Doh!”

In a chopping motion, I drove my hand into the back of the old man’s head, causing him to faint instantly.

“To the north tower! Hurry!”

“Hey... that was pretty awful of you...”

For now I would ignore Gourry’s judgment! We made a dash in the direction of the tower.

They said ‘tower,’ but it wasn’t just standing on it’s own. There was a passage extending from the palace that lead to a long rectangular building with a cylindrical tower springing up from it.With most of the soldiers heading for the guest lodging, I couldn’t see any guards around. It was getting to the point where–

“What’s going on?! What happened?!” A door was thrown open and from there appeared a bearded middle-aged man.

“Intruders! In the guest lodgings!”

“Intruders?! What kind of intruders?!”

Before I could answer the man’s question, in one go, Jade jumped at the man and knocked him over.

“The intruders...” Jade tore off half of his face mask. “...looked something like this. General Alce.”

* * *

“Jade?!” When the man saw Jade’s face, he let out a groan of shock. That means this guy, the ringleader, the one who promoted Sherra– is General Alce?!

“There are some things I want to ask you. A ton of things.” Just after speaking, he went silent. He definitely wanted to ask as many questions as he possibly could. About Sherra, the truth behind his father’s death, and also what was going on in the kingdom right now.

“But right now I only have one question. That girl, Sherra. Where is she?”

Alce let out a little sigh. “That girl, huh?” His tone sounded as if he was worn out. “Hah!” He pushed aside Jade, who had shown a moment of carelessness, and rose to his feet.

“If you want to know the answer to that...” He took his sword from his side. “You must win against me in battle!”

“Very well!” Jade answered by drawing his sword. “Please do not interfere, guys!” As he called out, he kicked the ground going in for an attack.

Clang!

Sword collided with sword, causing small sparks to to fly. Catching Jade's slash, Alce retreated back and countered with a horizontal strike. Jade stopped the blow and struck back. It was a head on battle between knights of the same school. Sword against sword, blade striking against blade. Two, three rounds, their swords flashed. Both men raised their steel above their heads and continued with a slash that cleaved the air. And then....

"Ugh!"

The first to drop to his knees, was General Alce. Jade's attack had left a shallow wound directly under Alce's right shoulder. It wasn't that Alce was weak. Well, not that he was really strong either. It was just clear that Jade was quite powerful.

"As expected... My skills haven't reached the level... of the son of General Grancis..."

"Now you flatter my father?! After you murdered him?!"

At Jade's assumption, Alce weakly shook his head side to side. "That's..." he shook his head again and continued with a gulp. "No... I can't help what had been said... It is no mistake that I introduced that girl to His Highness... and ruined this kingdom."

"So you weren't entirely involved in my father's death. Is that what you're telling me?"

"I won't tell you to believe me. And you have valid reason to be suspicious. I can't say that I was on good terms with your father but... I had great respect and admiration for Lord Wells. That much

is the absolute truth. What I was willing to do for the man I respected... I didn't think it was wrong..."

The 'Lord Wells' that Alce spoke of was none other than King Wells Xeno Gyria.

"But then, like some brown-noser, I humbly sought advice from His Highness and to be honest... I did criticize someone... General Grancis was that person. I introduced Sherra to His Highness and her outstanding talent was very well received. But that wasn't the end. From then on, the girl did whatever she could to get close to His Highness. I honestly can't say when but... I realized that the girl was always by the King's side... And, I thought it was a good thing, as long as the king was satisfied– And then one day, by Sherra's request, your father was called to the castle. I don't know how many days passed... before news of your father's death came out..."

"...." Jade stood motionlessly, holding onto his sword, and listening to the tale.

"Around then I started to think... that I had made a mistake..."

Just then.

"General!"

"General Alce!"

From within the building came the pounding footsteps of soldiers, interrupting Alce's story. I get it! He was just buying time with some long-winded story until his men showed up!

"These..."

At once, all of the soldiers readied their blades at us.

“Wait!” The one interrupting their action was none other than General Alce. “The intruders... have left the area... They went out the other door. Don’t worry about me... just go...”

“Huh?!” From us. And from the soldiers. For a moment we were all at a loss for words at what he had so unexpectedly done.

“B-But General!!”

“Go!” Alce jumped at the bewildered soldiers and scolded them a second time. Of course they weren’t going to just go with that. Among them there were definitely soldiers that recognized Jade. Jade, who had been banished from the city, was standing before the wounded Alce with a bloodied sword and looked as if he could strike again. There was no way they could believe Alce at that point.

“That... is an order!”

“...” As expected, the soldiers just silently stared at the man who gave them the order.

“U-Understood, Sir. But... that wound...”

“I said not to worry about it. I’m still talking to these people. Now go.”

Again, the soldiers were silent for a short while.

“Understood. Take care of yourself.” If there was something more appropriate to say there, they didn’t seem to know. The soldiers turned back and headed in the direction that Alce pointed out, leaving the big idiot behind.

“Why?”

“Because... I said... I was in the middle of a story.” As he watched the soldiers leave, the General answered Jade with a self-deprecating smile.

“I had begun to have regrets... I believe that’s where I was. As long as it pleased His Highness it would be okay. That’s what I thought until then. Even if His Highness had not been feeling at ease, I was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. It wasn’t necessary....”

“...” Jade returned his sword to it’s scabbard, and looked toward us without any hesitation.

“Someone... Can’t someone use a recovery spell to heal him?”

“Keh. You’re a good guy. Easily believing his story like that.” Milina separated herself from beside Luke and performed a recovery spell on Alce. “Well, that’s humans for ya. Once you start believing what any stranger tells you, you’re done for.” This time he spoke in an awkward mutter. Alce’s wound slowly cleared up.

“I’m sorry...” Not speaking to anyone in particular, Alce continued his story. “And then the other day, His Highness called on me and asked for me to do something for him. Using your name, Sir Jade, he made the order that you and your brother would be banished. And just as I thought, at My Lord’s side, was that girl. It was Sherra. At that time I realized it. That girl was controlling the kingdom. There are many fools in this kingdom, and I was one of them. But it was too late. Once I realized it...”

Alce let out a little sigh.“Sir Jade, if you do not believe me there is nothing I can do about it. If you want to kill me then kill me. In return– though it is impertinent of me to ask, I have one request. Right now, that girl is with His Highness. Do whatever you like to the girl, but I dare ask... Please. Do not harm His Highness.”

“As did I...” Jade nodded, “Because I also had a great respect for Lord Wells. That and one other thing. Right now I don’t know if what you have told me is true or false. For that reason, I cannot judge you here and now.”

“I see...”

From beside the general, the silent Milina let out a little sigh and stood up. From the start, the wound wasn’t very deep so now it was mostly healed. She left it as it was so that it could heal itself.

“I haven’t been speaking for very long. That girl, Sherra is with His Highness right now. They’re in the King’s office in the North wing of the Palace.”

“Understood.”

“I don’t know what that girl is up to. You be careful.”

“I shall be off then.” Jade bid farewell to Alce with a knightly kind of gratitude. He then turned on his heels and took off running down the corridor along with the other four of us. Looking over my shoulder, I could see General Alce crouching on the ground, watching us, and watching us run.

* * *

Because of the disturbance outside, there weren’t many guards in

the palace buildings. As I recall, if we did encounter any, either Gourry could knock them out, or Milina or myself could cast Sleeping and very easily put them under. Our party cut through the garden and continued on the path. And without running into any significant obstacles, we easily arrived at the palace. We were told that Sherra was with the king. Unless we made some kind of disturbance out here there would be no reason for the King's imperial guards to leave him. And if we did, we'd have to answer to a good amount of soldiers. At least that's what I thought.

?!

The moment that we entered the palace, we all stopped dead in our tracks. The place was just an average hall. Though it wasn't the main hall, it was used as a meeting place for soldiers, servants, and other lowly workers. But there weren't any people. And the room was full of an obvious presence. Negative energy.

"Is it that bastard's barrier again?"

"You could say that." The answer to Jade's question came in a familiar voice.

"Lebifore?!"

That's what the googly-eyed Mazoku called himself when he attacked us with Shaman. I looked around for him, but I couldn't tell where his voice was coming from.

"Bastards... Though they were just ordinary humans, I was going to stir up the castle guards by telling them about the air-show they were about to see. That was my plan anyway... but I guess it didn't

go so smoothly...”

“Well, looks like you’re just as good at manipulating the human psyche as we are.”

“Uh, well, that’s...” Lebifore warded off my provocation easily. “Anyway, with all these humans milling about, it’s a pain for the both of us. So I arranged for a stage to be set.” As he spoke, the sound of doors opening rose up from the lobby. He’ll probably follow that up with ‘Come this way...’

“Ha! Don’t make us laugh!” I puffed my chest out without really knowing if Lebifore was coming from that direction. “Our target is Sherra alone! That means small-fries like you can do whatever you like! And since we’d be dealing with such weaklings, it’s gotta be a trap. So from my understanding, there’s no reason to even start anything with you!”

“Um... Miss Lina...” Jade stealthily turned to me as I boasted our victory.

“Either way... if we’re trying to get to the office... we have to go that way...”

“....”

Well then.

“Because I don’t want to have to worry about defeating you and your friends later, before we fight Sherra, we shall challenge you with perfect posture! Just as I said!”

“You say you were planning that, but it’s not like we had any other options...”

“You’re being fussy, Gourry. At any rate, don’t let your guard down, guys.”

And so we began walking. Heading for the door, behind which the Mazoku were lying in wait for battle.

* * *

Preparations for battle were underway. Gourry wielded the Sword of Absorption (which is what I named it for my own convenience) with a Dark Claw spell attached to it. It wouldn’t do any damage to a Mazoku as it was. Heading down the corridor, Lebifore’s voice directed us left or right when the path split.

“It seems... we’re headed to the audience chamber.” Jade murmured as we walked in the direction we were given.

“Sherra’s in the office though... right?”

“I haven’t been there before directly but my father told me about it so, I think that’s where we’re going.”

“I see.” I shut my mouth and just nodded. Lebifore might be setting up a trap for us in the audience chamber.

Shortly after that, we eventually arrived in front of a door.

“The audience chamber.” Jade said as he placed a hand on the door. I pressed down on his shoulder signaling for him to wait. I indicated Gourry with my eyes. Gourry gave a little nod and pulled out his sword.

“Open it.”

The moment he said it, a wave of bloodlust burst from the door.

Gourry's sword flashed. Chunks of sliced up door fell to the ground. Looking toward where the door had been, I could see countless wriggling black shadows, and countless rays of light coming right for us!

"Vum Aeon!" Instantly Luke and Milina formed a barrier which wrapped around the five of us.

The rays of light smashed into the barrier then scattered into the changed space. In the moment, the barrier caught the first wave of attacks. I took a step outside of it and released the spell I had been chanting.

"Blam Blazer!" The amplified spell launched into the shadows.

"UUOoohhhh!!!" A battle cry rose up, and from the left and right, Jade and Gourry ran in for an attack with their swords. Luke and Milina disabled the barrier and chanting their next spell, ran in through the doorway.

A vaulted ceiling. A wide space. A red carpet stretched from where we stood all the way to a single vacant throne. On either side of the carpet was a row of marble pillars. I guessed the number of shadows in there was roughly around twenty or thirty. They all looked similar to Shaman or Hydra. Pitch black bodies. The weird cryptic patterning. Their heads were different, and their arms and legs were different. Some among them had weapons, and they were all in there just clamoring around. At least Lebifore wasn't there. Shaman could have been mixed in somewhere, but in this case there was no reason to go searching for him one by one. They haphazardly started throwing flare and freeze arrows in all directions as they

pleased. Slipping through all that, I released a spell in desperation.

“Blast Ash!”

“Boom!”

I don’t know how many of the black figures were wrapped up in the spell, but when it subsided there wasn’t even dust left. But this wasn’t the time for surveying the damage. There were others, no matter how good of a fight we were putting up. That said, for pure Mazoku these guys weren’t very strong. Far from it. In fact they were really weak. I thought for a moment. Their power probably wasn’t even the same rank as a lesser or brass demon. If that’s true... can we go? Just as I was thinking that, I felt a presence behind me.

“?!”

With just enough time to look behind me, I jumped to the side. Almost simultaneously, a beam of light tore through the back of my cape and passed my side.

“Well, you’re quite perceptive...” At the sound of that voice all the black shadows stopped moving. I looked behind me to see Lebifore and three other shadows. Lebifore, Shaman, and two others I didn’t know. One was a translucent, featureless giant. The other had two moss-colored tentacles sprouting from each of his shoulders and only one eye. Lebifore quickly looked around.

“I never thought I could take you down with just these, but in this short time you’ve managed to reduce their numbers this much...”

Certainly, in our offensive attack we had taken out half— I won’t say that. A third of the black Mazoku.

“As I thought, there is a great difference in your temperaments.... This way I won’t have to use...” I don’t understand a thing he’s talking about. He turned a glance in my direction. “It’s been a long time. Before, I didn’t realize you were *the* Lina Inverse. I was careless. I’ll allow you that much gratitude.”

“You don’t need to take that into consideration. You’re too fair, you aren’t bidding farewell to a good person here.” I returned Lebifore’s idle talk, but I was losing my patience and started migrating around the space. While the other four and the black Mazoku were paying attention to the movement of Lebifore’s gang, little by little, I was moving to a more advantageous place. Lebifore and his friends didn’t notice me and they didn’t even flinch at me.

“I owe a debt to that man, so...” said the moss-colored Mazoku.

“The guy who says he has a debt... Who is he?”

“He’s the guy who raided our hotel last time!” Luke answered

Gourry's question.

I see. These two are the ones who attacked Gourry at the hotel and survived.

"Well of course, rather than give a ridiculously long self-introduction, I returned to lament my fallen comrade. I can't help that I didn't make a strong impression on you!"

"Just tell us what the hell your name was!"

"Licagis." The Mazoku responded to Luke's provocation without showing any signs of agitation.

"Baze, you say something to these bastards too."

"....." At Lebifore's command, the featureless giant only moved his face a little. After all, he couldn't really talk.

Of course, while all this was going on, I was preparing my spell as I pleased. While the enemy addressed our group, talking about all sorts of things, their level of perception stayed the same.

"So that's all you have to say for a greeting... Well, that said–" Lebifore, as if suddenly remembering something, transparently turned toward Shaman. "Have you introduced yourself to those people?"

"Intro...duce...?"

"Yeah, did you tell them your name? You hear me?"

"Did not... tell.... not... needed."

Lebifore's eyes became a little thinner, as if he had said

something very interesting.

“It’s not a problem. Go ahead and tell them your name.”

“My... name...” Shaman said in his faltering voice. “My... name... is Grancis... Codewell....”

?!

A moment passed. The air around us froze. Grancis Codewell?! That means...

“Do not make fun of me!” The silence was broken by Jade’s outcry.

“That’s... *My father’s name*!”

“Ah, I know that.” Lebifore replied mockingly. “But it’s the truth. It’s no mistake. This is Grancis Codewell.”

“This is some kind of prank! Do you know where my father is?! For one, he’s already–”

“Dead? Of illness? And you saw his corpse? It appears his murder was reported as death by illness but then... isn’t it strange that the body would be missing if he was taken by disease?”

“But you said–”

“You know of Lesser demons, don’t you?” Lebifore interrupted with a voice that overpowered Jade’s. “When small animals, which are weak living beings, are possessed by higher ranking demons from the astral side, their bodies are transformed and born anew.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

“Well, Lord Sherra has the most interesting sword...”

...Ah!

“The magic sword Dulgofa. This wicked blade is actually a Mazoku. When it possesses a human, the mind is eroded away and the sword transforms the flesh into a great demon. If Dulgofa possesses a human being, the possession is undone when the ego is destroyed. Thus, you have a completed soulless human. After that, what do you think happens when a high-ranking Mazoku is called from the astral plane? Here is the answer. A few new high-ranking demons are made.”

“Wha... What are you saying, you bastard?!” Jade’s voice quivered as he cried out.

Certainly if I hadn’t seen Dulgofa’s power once before, I wouldn’t have just suddenly believed this impossible story. However... Maybe it is true. The things Lebifore is saying right now. If Shaman wasn’t pure Mazoku, from the beginning he must have been traveling using his own legs. That would explain the time lapse in between attacks. Each time he would have return to this city to receive his next order. Now I understand the gap between his abilities and his actions. But the other shadows in the room weren’t even the same rank as lesser or brass demons. As far as that’s concerned, it’s as General Alce said himself, he merely played the role of the mediator. How do I put this... For Sherra, it wasn’t completely necessary to ask for cooperation.

“But then, there is somewhat of a problem with this method. The magic power is different. It’s ability to move is highly dependent on

the original human's qualities. Didn't you think he was strong? Now you all shall witness it."

"That means–" I averted my gaze and looked toward the jostling black shadows in the room.

"That's right. They became a hindrance to our plans, this kingdom's civil servants and nobility. I wonder how many of them were said to have "died of illness." It seems for most of them, mobility wasn't really their strong point.

"You're lying!" Jade screamed.

"It's the truth." Lebifore replied calmly. "If you think it's a lie I'll prove it. You've practiced the sword with your father before, haven't you? And you remember his swordsmanship? Grancis, this guy will be your opponent. Go easy on him." As he said it, Shaman took a step forward, swaying, with a sword dangling from one hand.

"Whoooohhhh!" Jade ran toward Shaman.

Clang!

Jade started out by letting loose a slash, which Shaman easily caught. It was like he had completely expected it.

"Th-This—! This! This!"

Shaman easily, and equally, warded off every lunge that Jade threw at him. When Shaman let out a slash, Jade caught the blow. He jumped far out of the way.

"Lies..." he whispered, his voice trembling. "All lies!"

"You really think so?" At Lebifore's question, he was

momentarily at a loss for words.

“It’s not true... but... But why?!”

“The swordsmanship is the same, isn’t it? Do you understand now? The truth? The reason Grancis knows your swordsmanship so well. I wonder how many times the two of you have practiced together.”

“Li...” Jade went silent, his fists shaking. He glared at Lebifore. “Turn him back! My father! Turn him back into a human!”

“It’s useless to even discuss that”

Jade screamed as if he was about to vomit blood, but Lebifore warded him off without hesitation.

“If it were only temporary, if he were able to go back to being a human, all that would be left of him would be a crippled invalid.”

“You’re lying!”

“It’s true. If it were temporary, do you think Grancis himself, if he still had a functioning mind remaining, would have killed your brother– his son, with his own hands?

“?!” This time for sure, Jade was petrified by Lebifore’s words. So It’s true. Shaman, no, Grancis did kill someone who looked as if he could have been Jade’s brother.

“It’s just as I said... kekeke...” He gave us a little smile. He sounded like he was having fun. That’s because he’s feeding on Jade’s despair. It becomes like food for the Mazoku, the negative emotions of all living things.

"...so?" Stepping in for Jade, it was my turn to ask questions. "What are you guys scheming? You infiltrated the kingdom, took control of the political powers, and now changing people into demons? It's similar to what Chaos Dragon Gaav was doing some time ago... The things he did in order to wage war on the Dark Lord sealed in the Kataart Mountains. So what now? Are you planning an all out war with the humans?"

"I don't think think I need to answer that, do I?" Lebifore replied, suppressing a smile. "First of all, we have a match to start. Of course, it will be to the death. Now shall we start quickly?"

Jade was so severly shaken up, of course he couldn't start 'quickly.'

"I guess so..." But of course, Jade still agreed to Lebifore's challenge."It seems... I couldn't save my father..." he said as he pointed his sword toward Grancis. "Then... shall we start?" That became the sign of battle.

* * *

Jade kicked the ground. At the same time, Grancis did too. The other three Mazoku dispersed while the surrounding black shadows, the demonified people, got into attack stances.

"Fel Za Rhed!"

"Assha Dist!"

Luke and Milina released the spells they had already prepared and blew through the demons.

"Ooohhh!!!"

Jade flipped his sword at Grancis, and just barely caught the return slash. While it looked like Grancis had some felxibility, that wasn't true for Jade. In terms of skill and in terms of spirit. Jade was hesitant. He couldn't win like this. Once, twice more, their swords met. For an instant there was an opportunity for attack. Without holding back, Grancis plowed toward Jade!

It had been on the verge of reaching Jade's body. What stopped the attack was Gourry's sword. Grancis retreated a step, widening the distance between them.

"There's no point in helping me!"

"Hey now...." While pointing his sword at Grancis, Gourry turned to Jade with a troubled look on his face. "You... probably think you can fight him by just stabbing away. But even if you say 'shut up and watch me' and keep fighting like that, the guy can't understand your feelings. No matter what you do." Gourry, but also Jade, was aware of this. Jade wouldn't be able to reach Grancis. Jade was certainly strong. But his strength? His strength was in his common sense. But Gourry and Grancis's strength was far beyond that.

"It's come to this... I can't save him by defeating him..." Jade murmured as he clenched his trembling fist. "I... wanted to save my father... That's my responsibility as his son... but... as I am now, I can't reach him..." Jade spoke as if he was spitting up blood again. He gave a small bow to Gourry.

"My father... please..."

"Yeah, I get it..." Gourry brandished his sword toward Grancis.

“I’m your opponent now. Let’s go.” And then sparks flew from Gourry and Grancis’s swords.

* * *

“Elmekia Lance!”

Lebifore easiliy sidestepped the lance of light I released. But only for the moment.

“Break!” with a point of my finger the light burst near Lebifore. By adding on to the arrangement of the spell, I can do little tricks like this. It just doesn’t do a great deal of damage. Probably the same amount as being doused in hot or cold water. The Mazoku groaned and staggered a little. I took out my sword and, chanting a spell in my mouth, made a dash.

“You keep using the same hand...!”

With the sword in my right hand I lunged forward.

“Eat this!”

But at the last second Lebifore jumped back and just barely dodged the point of my sword. At that point I stepped into a run holding my left hand out and aimed for Lebifore’s head. I was done reciting my spell! But.

“Good!” After he said it, Lebifore’s body sunk. He slipped through my attack! Was he planning to counter?!

However—

“Elmekia flame!”

Magic doesn't just come from one particular hand! A spell that I had changed the arrangement of, now appeared before Lebifore's eyes, right in front of my stomach.

"?!"

The light made a direct hit into Lebifore's face!

* * *

While the sound of tearing wind rose up, Moss-colored tentacles attacked Luke from four different directions. Little by little, as the timing of the four-part attack began to stagger, he jumped behind him. Maybe to dodge, maybe to make one sweeping slash with his sword, somehow Luke would manage to get a cut in.

"Blast Ash!" Responding to Luke's voice, a blackness enveloped the moss-colored Mazoku, Licagis. But the next moment...With the sound of a wet balloon popping, the black air faded! Licagis's brute force approach to magic had scattered the Blast Ash.

"Wha–?!"

Licagis drew near the shocked Luke. In a panic, he began chanting his next spell. He stepped back and– At that point the demons aimed toward them and started indiscriminately raining down flare arrows!

"Ch!" Somehow he managed to dodge them, but he still ended up on the ground. Licagis's tentacles groaned. And then, moss-colored tentacles slammed forward.

* * *

The arrows released by the demons flew through the air, aiming for Milina, but somehow they managed to miss her body. They aimed at her a second time and– Instantly, one demon let out a scream of pain and collapsed. Jade came running in from the side and took a swing at the demons, which then shifted their focus from Milina to Jade. But that didn't mean Milina was unmarked. With overwhelming power, a giant arm swung through the air.

Whoa!

Accompanied by the sound of howling wind, the translucent giant mazoku, Baze, flung his arm out toward Milina. She took a great leap backward and evaded it. No wait, she planned to evade it.

"?!"

The moment she landed, she found herself exposed. By the tip of her nose, she had managed to just barely miss the giant arm swinging side to side. She misread the distance?! I said he was translucent, but it's a bit different. Baze's body was translucent like a jellyfish. That's why it's so difficult to judge the distance. Milina had already jumped back to give herself more room. Taking a step to the side, she aimed at Baze and released the spell she had been chanting.

"Fel Za Rhed!"

But Baze had uncharacteristically light footwork for his large build and easily avoided the attack. The spell that was unable to connect with it's target, continued past Baze and, made a direct hit with one of the demons. And then again. Milina and Baze went head to head.

* * *

The sound of swords clashing continued without end. Gourry's slash would be caught by Grancis, Grancis's returning slash would be repelled by Gourry. Numerous times, sparks flew from their blades, until simultaneously they both jumped backwards to widen the distance. Grancis kicked the ground. His position was low, as if he were about to crawl along the floor. He dashed forward and scooped up to release his attack. On the opposite end, Gourry went for a downward strike. If it had the same amount of power behind it, Gourry would have the advantage!

Clang! Sparks fluttered into the air. That moment, Grancis removed his left hand from the hilt of his sword and pinched the blade of Gourry's sword.

"Wha?!"

With his left hand he prevented the movement of Gourry's sword, and with the sword in his right hand, he aimed for Gourry's leg. Gourry avoided this by jumping into the air. Even if Gourry landed on him, his victory was decided. But when Gourry jumped into the air, Grancis twisted his left hand. And the sword. And Gourry. Clearly his strength was not the work of man. Well, yeah, he wasn't exactly man. Normally if Gourry had been thrown like that he would've just ended up on the floor.

"Ku–!"

But somehow he recovered his footing in mid-air and, while a little off-balance, he managed to land on his feet. This too was not the work of man. Before Gourry could recover his posture, Grancis

stood up, his left hand still grasping Gourry's sword. And then, with the sword in his right hand he lunged toward Gourry, whose sword was still trapped.

* * *

Lebifore's head was completely gone. One down! Or so I thought. A bad premonition rushed at me from the rear, which I promptly avoided. At that moment, a beam of light burst past my side. It had come from— Lebifore!

He's still alive?!

"You dodged it!"

"Oh no. It hit me." The headless Lebifore answered. The space between his shoulders warped and a new head readily regenerated! Wait... That's wrong. What Lebifore said. It didn't hit him. If you think about it, before my spell connected, Lebifore removed his own head to avoid the attack.

...what a weird guy...

When I fought him before, he caught me off guard by retreating. He's got some strange tactics. How many times am I going to have to fight this guy? In order to defeat him, just like last time, I couldn't be caught off guard. But how do I do it? For now...

"Astral Vine!" I pulled out my sword and charged it with magic power.

"...Pointless..." Lebifore's eyes warped as if they were smiling.

* * *

Neck bones cracked as Licagis' tentacles smashed into them. Of course, they belonged to the black neck of a demon.

"Weakling! Don't get in my way!" The demons quivered at Licagis' scolding. During that time, Luke regained a proper stance. Without interrupting his spell he said to Licagis, "Hey, I don't know what you guys are planning, but I'm not about to show you any gratitude for it."

"Naturally. I can't bear thinking about how we retreated last time or winning by borrowing strength from these weak demons.... You only have to kill me. But at the same time your whole party is trying to get somewhere. And it seems your mind is not in the right place."

"Interesting. Let's see if that's true!" Luke said and began chanting a spell.

"Of course!" Licagis barked and kicked th floor.

Luke jumped back while continuing his spell, but Licagis was quick. With Luke within range of Licagis' tentacles, they all bent in unison. And then, in mid air, the four tentacles split apart and formed ten slender tendrils, all coming to ensnare Luke!

* * *

The fight between Baze and Milina was completely stiff. They mutually attacked. They mutually dodged each other's blows. Milina had already learned how to properly read the length of Baze's arm. Once you know the trick it's pretty simple. When Baze makes a downward strike with those translucent arms of his, they stretch slightly. Somehow managing to dodge that, if you convince yourself

that the translucence isn't the only reason you misread the distance, you're gonna get hit hard. Twice. And that's the secret to it. But Milina easily read it, avoided his attack and released her spell. Baze's attacked with his fist combined with a ball of magic energy, which Milina also dodged.

"Elmekia Lance!"

Of course Baze avoided her attack as well. The spell continued on it's path and pierced one of the demons.

* * *

Normally this is where it would have ended. With his sword pinned, cutting him was— But just like Grancis, Gourry was no ordinary swordsman. Gah! Grancis' sword made a great snap. With his left fist, Gourry struck the middle of Grancis' sword. At the same time, he kicked hard into Grancis' stomach. Releasing Gourry's sword, Grancis was blown away, with Gourry following after him.

"Kiiiooooo!" Grancis cried out as he was being thrown. An arrow of magic energy appeared before hime, launching toward Gourry! As you'd expect, he didn't have enough room to avoid it.

"Sword!" Gourry aimed at the light coming toward him, and the sword let out a shriek. The Dark Claw spell that had been absorbed into Gourry's sword was released, crashing into Grancis' arrow of light, and canceling both spells!

An then Gourry, continuing his pursuit pierced his sword into Grancis' body.

* * *

“Elmekia Lance!”

No matter how many spells I threw at him, Lebifore didn’t show any signs of agitation. He could transform his body, opening a hole in his own stomach so that my spell would pass through. But this time’s gonna taste different!

“Break!”

The moment it seemed like it would pass through, I let my spell burst! Try and dodge this!

“Ha!” Lebifore had kind of a ridiculous smile on his face. “I already saw that one coming... But even if I had been careless... that little burst spell of yours wouldn’t have hurt me!” As he spoke, the hole in his stomach returned to normal.

Ugh!! I thought that would do it! I took him by surprise! There’s no way he could have known... Timing this is difficult. And right now there’s a good chance I might lose this. It’s gotten to the point where I’m using every trick in the book and I can’t continue to buy time like this. I continued chanting a spell in my mouth.

“It’s useless! Useless!” Lebifore egged me on. His voice oozed with satisfaction. “How many times must I tell you it’s useless—”

“Fel Za Rhed!” The voice came from behind Lebifore. Locked in battle with Baze, Milina had released a shot, which headed straight for Lebifore.

“!!” At the last second, Lebifore warped his body and opened a hole in his chest. Again, letting the spell pass through.

Now!

I took action, aiming my left hand for Lebifore's face.

"There's no way that—" Lebifore back at me.

"Elmekia—"

"Trying to surprise me?!"

The hole the mazoku had opened in his chest closed up. And then...

"Gaaahhhh!!!" Lebifore's scream rang out.

With Milina's spell, Lebifore's attention was turned from me momentarily. Finding the right time, I used the sword I held in my right hand. Lebifore himself opened a hole in his chest where Milina's spell had been aimed. Again toward me— with my spell ready to go, Lebifore returned his attention to me, but the hole had already, probably unconsciously, filled up. So I thrusted my sword into him. The sword I had enchanted with Astral Vine. With Lebifore's screams layering up...

"—Lance!" I released my spell.

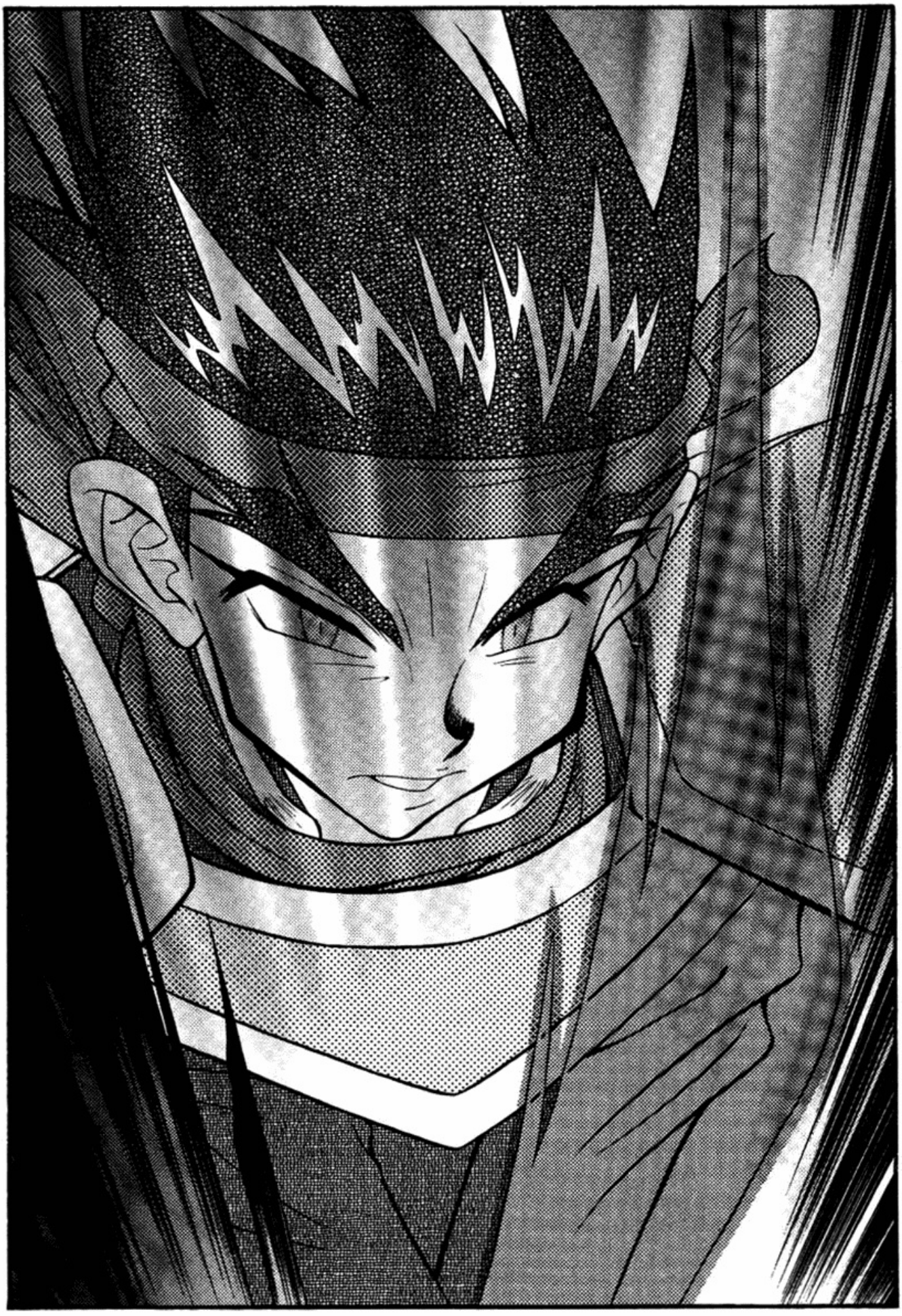
"Do–!" Feeling the pain in his chest, this time for sure, my attack had completely destroyed Lebifore's head.

* * *

A moment passed. Luke jumped back but stopped suddenly. Firing the sword in his hand, this time from the front– He went plunging toward Licagis.

"?!" His sense of distance thrown off, Licagis briefly showed some agitation.

“Ruby Eye Blade!” Luke’s voice rang out. The next moment, Luke walked through the two parts of Licagis’ body, which had been split lengthwise. He stood there with the red magic sword in one hand.



* * *

Baze's arm swung through the air. But did this guy even realize what was going on? Without saying anything he released a ball of magic, which Milina very easily dodged.

...Yeah, he doesn't seem to know what's going on. Milina's goal wasn't to defeat him, but to distract him while backing up her friends. Whenever she released a spell it was always aimed at Baze, as well as one other enemy. That could be one of the demons, or even Lebifore, who I was fighting. Baze didn't notice. In this room all the Mazoku had already been defeated except for him. That is, until I fired a spell directly into his back.

The Old Dragon who Knows the Scheme of Dynast's Army

"Somehow... It's over..."

"In here it is." Milina responded to Luke's comment. Jade stood up silently by himself. He was looking in the direction of where Grancis' body lay defeated. If Grancis had come into existence the same way that Lesser and brass demons do, then a regular sword would have been enough to kill him. But Gourry had defeated him by firing magic energy from his sword into Grancis' chest. His body, like that of the other Mazoku and demons in the room, withered away before our eyes, not even leaving a trace.

"Uh... well..." Gourry stammered without knowing what he should say. Jade looked at him over his shoulder.

"...Thank you for that."

".... " Again, not knowing how to respond, Gourry remained silent, scratching at his face a little. Jade raised his head and looked around at the rest of the group.

"Everyone. Let's go." he said distinctly, all the hesitation having disappeared from his face. "To the King's office— Where Sherra is."

* * *

UgoOOoooooHIIiiiiiiiii.... GoooouuuAAhhhh....

"A... scream...?" While heading down the corridor towards the

office, Milina commented almost flatly on the bizarre sound that rose up.

No one enters this area except for the King and those who are close to him. That being so, this place was excessively gloomy. The bare walls were exposed. There were no decorations of any kind with lamps burning here and there. The strange sound, like pulling on a long tail, echoed throughout the dim passageway. Honestly, it was the creepiest thing I'd ever heard.

"Isn't that just the wind?" Luke said, lacking any interest.

"But it really sounded like some kind of voice, don't you think?" Gourry responded without any hesitation, also sounding as if it was of no interest.

"The screams of the King of Dils..."

"Huh?" Jade's mumbling didn't get past me.

"Ah! No, it's just a rumor I've heard from some guys!" Jade waved his hands around in a panic. "I hear it's just some ghost story that's been handed down from somewhere. They say the old king is being held captive, still alive, but under a Mazoku curse."

If that was the rumor, I'd heard it before. Around 20 years ago. Under the fear of being conquered by the Mazoku, the second king of Dils, due to a Mazoku curse known as the Raugnut Rushavna, was transformed into an immortal lump of flesh. Tasting eternal pain, he was brought back to this palace. Even now, death will not greet him. He is imprisoned somewhere in this castle, his moans of agony continuing to this day.

“It’s probably just wind passing through the corridor, since that’s what it sounds like. I think that’s how the rumor came about.”

It’s not at all mysterious that a strange rumor would come out of something like that. But at the same time– It’s not just a rumor, at least, there’s still a possibility that it isn’t. The former ruler of this kingdom went missing when he went to face the Mazoku subjugation. That is a fact. Also, there are Mazoku in this world, and the Raugnut Rushavna curse does exist. All facts. Honestly, I’m curious to find out whether those were rumors or not, but now’s not the time for investigation.

“Oh yeah. Gourry, take out your sword for a bit. Everyone, step back.” I began chanting a spell. “Blast Ash.”

Something black wrapped around the sword and the next minute, the blade returned to normal. The blade was tainted a deep black before returning to it’s original silver radiance. Okay. Now it’s been charged with magic energy! Well, I don’t think it’s enough to be effective against Sherra but...

“This has a fixed range, about the size of an adult with their arms stretched out. Understand that it’s a pretty big area of effect when put into operation, so you absolutely cannot fire this when one of us is near the enemy. You understand that right?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Gourry casually answered me as he returned the sword to its scabbard.

You... Do you really understand? Because if you accidentally hit one of us, you’re not just gonna get off with me calling you an idiot forever.

“Hey, do you really know where this office is?” Luke asked Jade as we began walking again. Jade gave an uncertain nod.

“Yeah....probably.”

“Probably...?”

“It’s the room next to the audience chamber, or the antechamber, but I haven’t seen any indication of it. Because I’m just a knight, I wouldn’t be able to go somewhere like the King’s office, especially since I don’t hold any ranks... And I won’t listen to any complaints about me getting us lost while looking for it.”

No... if there was someone to blame for getting us lost while looking for the office, I don’t think I would tell the others. But anyway, for quite a while now, the passageway had been a single path. There was occasionally a diversion, but there hadn’t been any major splits. We couldn’t have gotten lost. And there’s no reason to have made the office a secret room.

“Oh yeah. Jade, I need to tell you something.” I continued walking as I spoke.

“That General Alce or whatever. He said Sherra would be with the King, right?”

“Yes, certainly–”

“While we bust into this room, I want you to hurry along and go grab the king’s little friend for us.”

“Eh?!” He automatically stopped and let out a stupid-sounding yelp. “H-Hold on just a minute! I am going to fight as well! I won’t be a burden!”

“Whoa, I’m not saying you would be.” I waved my hands around at him. Well to be honest, if we’re going against Sherra, I feel like Jade will be our greatest weakness. Actually, it’s just that the other four of us will probably be sufficient. It’s not that I think Jade would be unreliable but...

“Okay? Let me tell you something. If this breaks into a fierce battle, who’s going to help the King? If I was at the King’s side the whole time, would I be able to shoot off a bunch of spells all over the place? If not, what would we do if the enemy took him hostage? If you don’t, there won’t be anyone there to escort the King from the battlefield. And, to be blunt, the four of us have absolutely no intention or sense of duty to kindly and courteously escort the king. You can do whatever, but our goal is not to protect the king, but to defeat Sherra. So there’s only one person who can do it. And that’s why I’m asking this.”

“True, but...!” As I ran to catch up with the others, Jade raised his voice in protest.

“Well, since you’re not worried about whether the King lives or dies, it’s okay if we fight right next to him, right?”

“No! That would be barbaric and foolish!”

“Right? Then this is something for you to do. Well, since they King will believe whatever Sherra says, I don’t think he’ll listen to us so easily.... If we were really concerned about the King’s safety, we’d have to knock him unconscious and drag him out of there.”

“.....” Jade was silent for a short while. “Understood. And once His Highness has been led to safety, I shall return quickly and

participate in battle. If that's all right with you."

"It's not like that..."

No matter what I say, you still want to fight, huh? But Sherra's power is probably much higher than what Jade is expecting. There's a good chance it's even higher than what Luke and Milina are expecting. But if any of them get even the tiniest scratch from that magic sword of her's, they won't be our ally anymore. I let out a little sigh.

"You say 'safety' but... If you're thinking a closet somewhere in the castle or even a guardroom out in the city, you're wrong. Because if Sherra is serious, this won't be a fight. It'll be annihilation. And if that's the case, there probably won't be a safe place in this entire city."

"...you're over-exaggerating."

"It's the truth. Think about it. The Mazoku we defeated in the audience chamber– Do you really think that was all of their forces?"

"So you believe that there are more of them. Is that what you're saying?"

"There's a good possibility. I don't know what their motive is, but they've got the whole kingdom in their hands. Which means they should also have control over the King. If you lead him to somewhere you think is safe, the remaining enemies are going to be rushing toward you to take the King back. Do you think you could just laugh it off if something like that happened?"

"That's... well..."

“Hey, that guy, what was his name? That one gatekeeper that helped us hide.”

“Maius?”

“Right, right. Didn’t he say it back then? Even if you’re expelled, you never forget the spirit of a knight. And protecting the King is the responsibility of a knight.” I said with a wink.

“Uh...” Jade groaned while beginning to smile a little. “I guess... that’s right.... Understood! I, Jade Codewell, have been given the important task of protecting His Highness, King Wels Zeno Gyria. It is my responsibility!”

Yes, yes. That’s good.

“Well then, we’ll let you work hard on your ‘important task.’”

I paused and looked over my shoulder when I heard Luke’s voice. On my way down that endless passage, a door came into view. There was light filtering through a crack in the door.

“Look’s like we’re here.”

* * *

“Office”

By the writing on the plaque beside the door, it was no mistake. This fight probably won’t go for very long. The title of ‘General’ isn’t there just for show. Sherra has overwhelming amounts of power. Even if we can hit her, she definitely won’t go down quietly. And if even one of us fell, it wouldn’t take long for her to defeat the rest. In the end– Either Sherra will cut through us all quickly, or

we'll defeat her through coordinated attacks before she can. That's the kind of fight this is going to be. However you looked at it, this was going to be a short, decisive battle. And the last one standing would more than likely be...

All of us silently nodded at each other. With his sword at the ready, Gourry forced open the door. The first impression I had was a fairly large room, the main focus being a large black oak desk. On top of the desk was a mountain of paperwork. And next to it was a man and a woman. The man– this was probably King Wels. He looked to be almost 30, with long Black hair and a tough physique. Naturally he was a person clad in majesty. But he didn't seem like he was being seduced by Sherra's charm or controlled by her power. But that could be because he was being bothered. That was my theory. Kneeling beside him, in blue ceremonial dress embroidered with silver, and her hair collected into a long braid, was a girl with a long black sword in one hand.

At first glance this probably just looked like the King being attended by his female soldier. But the one this female soldier served wasn't the king of this kingdom but a Lord of Darkness.

"Who are you?" Without looking disturbed, he rose from his chair, questioning us in a complacent tone. Jade knelt before him.

"I am Jade Codewell, member of the Blue Knighthood Disregarding your Highness' wishes, we intruded so suddenly— Very rude of us. I humbly ask for your forgiveness."

"Jade Codewell? I see. You are General Grancis' eldest son. But then shouldn't you have been banished for fleeing the city without

permission?”

“As you willed it. Be that as it may, I sensed the Kingdom was in great danger, and acknowledging my exile, I dared to—”

“Silence, Madman!” Jade was interrupted by the female soldier’s heavy resonating voice. Slowly, the female soldier– no, Sherra rose up.

Damn! She’s glaring at us!

“The disturbance in the castle just now was all your doing! What are you after? It can’t be... His Higness’ life?!” She said firmly. Hearing Sherra accuse us of being after his life, the King would probably pass out. That’s very clever of her.

“If I could speak to His–”

“Don’t screw with me! My Lord, listening to these people’s nonsense will only defile your ears. Allow me to pass judgment on them. Please retreat for the time being.”

“Sure. I’ll leave it to you. I’m counting on you, Sherra.” Easily accepting what Sherra said, King Wels gave her a generous nod. She then took his hand and kissed the back of it.

“I raise my sword for you, My Lord.” Sherra stood up again. Wels turned around and placed his hand on the wall, somehow manipulating it.

Gggggggggg... There came a low heavy sound and the back wall was suddenly wide open. I see. An official standard for a king: the emergency secret passage.

“Your Highness!” Jade rose to follow King Wels into the wall, but he was stopped by Gourry’s hand.

“What are you—?!”

“Idiot! If you go now you’ll die!”

Right. Sherra was standing right next to the entrance.

Gggggggggg.... The wall made the same rumbling sound and King Wels was swallowed behind the closing entrance. It probably leads somewhere outside, but there was no reason to go after the king.

“Jade! Go find General Alce! Hurry and secure the king!”

“Of course! Understood!” Jade answered me by turning on his heels and running out of the room.

If he’s a general, Alce should at least know about the castle’s secret passageways. If Jade explains the circumstances to him, he’ll probably lend a hand.

“Well then...” I shifted my gaze to the girl. “Now we have some privacy. General Sherra.”

Slowly, she turned to me. “I see. So you sent him after Alce.”

“You said it. But that was very knightly of you back there Sherra. That kiss on the hand, aww. Did you decide to stop being a Mazoku and become an actress instead?”

“That’s a fine greeting after not seeing each other for so long. Don’t you have any manners at all? But anyway... you’ve been causing trouble for me all over the place, Lina Inverse.”

“Or maybe your tactics were sloppy. Maybe it’s because Grausherra named you Sherra. Cheap name, cheap tac–”

“Shut up!” Enraged, Sherra raised her voice and I automatically shut my mouth. “Don’t you say that about my name!”

Uh-oh. This is bad. She’s seriously angry about that. I was just planning on teasing her a bit, but I guess that backfired. Maybe she actually asked Dynast why he named her that and he said something like “I didn’t even think about it <3”

“Setting that aside. You say I’ve been interfering with your plans but...” I scrambled to change the subject. “What the hell are you planning? Lending Dulgofa out here and there, and then those recent outbreaks of demons all over the place. You were behind that weren’t you?”

“I don’t need to answer that!” She said bluntly, right before taking the sword– the black magic sword, Dulgofa– from her hip.

Man, this girl’s impatient! She’s not as composed as she was last time!

“From me... there is no escape!” I’m not sure why, but at that line her bloodlust swelled up.

Here she comes!

Dulgofa sliced through the air, creating a black shockwave that headed straight for us. The four of us immediately jumped in four different directions. The shockwave easily smashed through the door.

“Fel Za Rhed!” Luke had been casting a spell, but when he

released it, Sherra only waved her left hand and the spell vanished.

“What the–?!” Witnessing the power of a high-level Mazoku, Luke cried out in shock.

There, Milina continued the attack. “Elmekia Flame”

If it had hit a brass demon, that one attack would have obliterated it. But Sherra only waved her sword and very easily extinguished it.

“Ohhh!!” Gourry came charging in from the side. Though she had intercepted both Luke and Milina’s attacks, she now spread out her hands and without retreating— Gourry hit her directly in the chest. Just as he did, he dashed away from her. Without once changing her expression, Sherra aimed several shots of magical energy at Gourry! Someway or another he evaded them, but it seems... Gourry’s attack... didn’t work. You’d think with a spell as powerful as the Blast Ash, it would be near impossible not to cause any damage.

“Hold on! Are you kidding me?!”

“Ah! But Lina said so from the beginning!” Gourry cried in response to Luke’s complaints. “But if it’s like that..” Gourry swung his sword at Sherra. He was far out of reach. Instantly, Sherra was enveloped in blackness, which quickly disappeared. Gourry had released a Blast Ash from the sword– and Sherra had easily cleared it away. What were you trying to accomplish there, Gourry?

Sherra paid no attention to Gourry and instead released a shockwave toward me. I dashed to the side. Following my

movements, Sherra kicked the floor. She's aiming for me first?! This is bad! If we go into close combat, I'm at a disadvantage. I don't think I can stop a blow from a Mazoku wielding Dulgofa with just my short sword! Just then, Gourry came running in from the side. With the sword sticking out, he was able to catch Sherra's shockwave with the blade. I get it! He's going to absorb Sherra's own power into the sword! But the problem is, can the sword really absorb something like that? The shockwave coiled around the blade and—

creak!

The sound of creaking metal. Is it no good? Gourry drew his sword. Letting the remaining energy from the shockwave rush past him, he forced his way toward Sherra. Understanding the nature of Gourry's sword, Sherra gasped and retreated back. Then–

"Dynast Brass!"

My boosted spell rained down lightning on Sherra

"Huh?!"

With lightning pouring over her entire body, she couldn't help but cry out a little. But with a sound like something bursting open, the spell was smashed apart.

"Ooooohhhh!" Gourry went in for a slash.

Clang!

Dulgofa and Gourry's sword, the two blades grinding together created a sharp, screeching noise. Gourry raised his sword. Over and over, the swords met, until finally Sherra took a great leap back.

“Hah!”

Simultaneously, Gourry swung his sword. The shockwave that Sherra had just released was now coming back at her!

“Don’t mock me!” At Sherra’s war cry, the shockwave disappeared into thin air. She then sent several orbs of magic energy into the air.

“Ra Tilt!”

Milina sent a pillar of blue light wrapping around Sherra. Gourry dashed forward and plunged his sword into the shadow at the center of the pillar.

“We did it?!” Milina cried out.

But not yet! Gourry had only pierced a shadow. It’s a specialty of the Mazoku, leaving behind their ‘lizard’s tail.’ That was only a fragment of her spirit body. She had left us a decoy while she retreated to the Astral plane. Following that, she would probably reappear... behind me?!

At least, that’s what I was thinking. But instead, the shadow appeared behind Milina.

“Behind you!” Gourry cried out.

Sherra released a ball of magic. In a panic, Milina wrenched her body.

Though she avoided a direct hit, the shot from behind smashed through Milina’s left shoulder guard. She’s going after Milina now–

“Ruby Eye Blade!”

Luke produced a red blade of light just as he had done before, and slashed at Sherra. He's using it twice in one day?! He's gonna exhaust his power like that! Dulgofa collided with the magic sword and a wave of energy surged out. If we're talking purely about cutting ability, the Ruby Eye Blade was probably better. But Dulgofa was wielded by Sherra, who had the ability to regenerate infinitely. If things keep going like this, Luke will use up all of his energy first!

If it's already come to this, I can't waste any time while Sherra's stalled. Quickly, I recited the incantation for the blade of Nihility– the Ragna Blade. Do I have enough time?! Surely it was useless. The blade of light Luke had called forth was growing faint, and I wasn't done reciting my spell. And then, the red light extinguished. Dulgofa slashed downward.

"?!"

While slashing, Sherra's body bent way back.

Gourry!

When he rushed in earlier, it wasn't for no reason. He had charged the sword with a Ra Tilt. Whoa, Gourry! You're using your head unusually well today! Of all the fights we've had against high ranking Mazoku, this one's relatively painless!

Dulgofa fell from Sherra's hand. And right into Luke's.

"Hey! Hey!"

"Wha–!" Sherra automatically cried out in shock as Luke pierced her with Dulgofa.

“...ha...” she let out a small gasp.

Quickly he let go of the sword and stepped back.

“ah...”

She stood there, with her own sword stuck through her stomach. She began to walk toward Luke. And then...

“Hah!”

Gourry sent a Ra Tilt exploding from the sword. Even then, Sherra was still standing. But this ends now!

“Ragna....!”

Sherra looked over her shoulder. Right at me.

?!

At that moment, doubt flitted through my head. But I didn’t have time to think things over!

“–Blade!” I called forth the blade of nothingness... and Dynast General Sherra’s body split apart beautifully.

* * *

A small clear noise rang out. Dulgofa’s blade had snapped off. As it hit the floor, it broke apart like dry soil. We destroyed it. Dulgofa. It had lost the source of its power, it’s master, General Sherra.

“We did it...I guess... somehow...”

“Not ‘somehow”Milina entered from the side with a straight face. “You just suddenly grabbed her sword. It was reckless of you.”

“Sigh. Milina. You’re not actually saying it but really you were just worried about me <3”

“If that sword would have taken over your body, our enemy would have increased by one.”

“.....oh.” Luke groaned at her coldness.

Surely if at that moment Sherra had used Dulgofa to take control of Luke, we probably would have been defeated. But I never thought about taking Sherra’s sword from her and attacking her with it. I mean, I’ve done some pretty reckless things before, but this guy’s even worse.

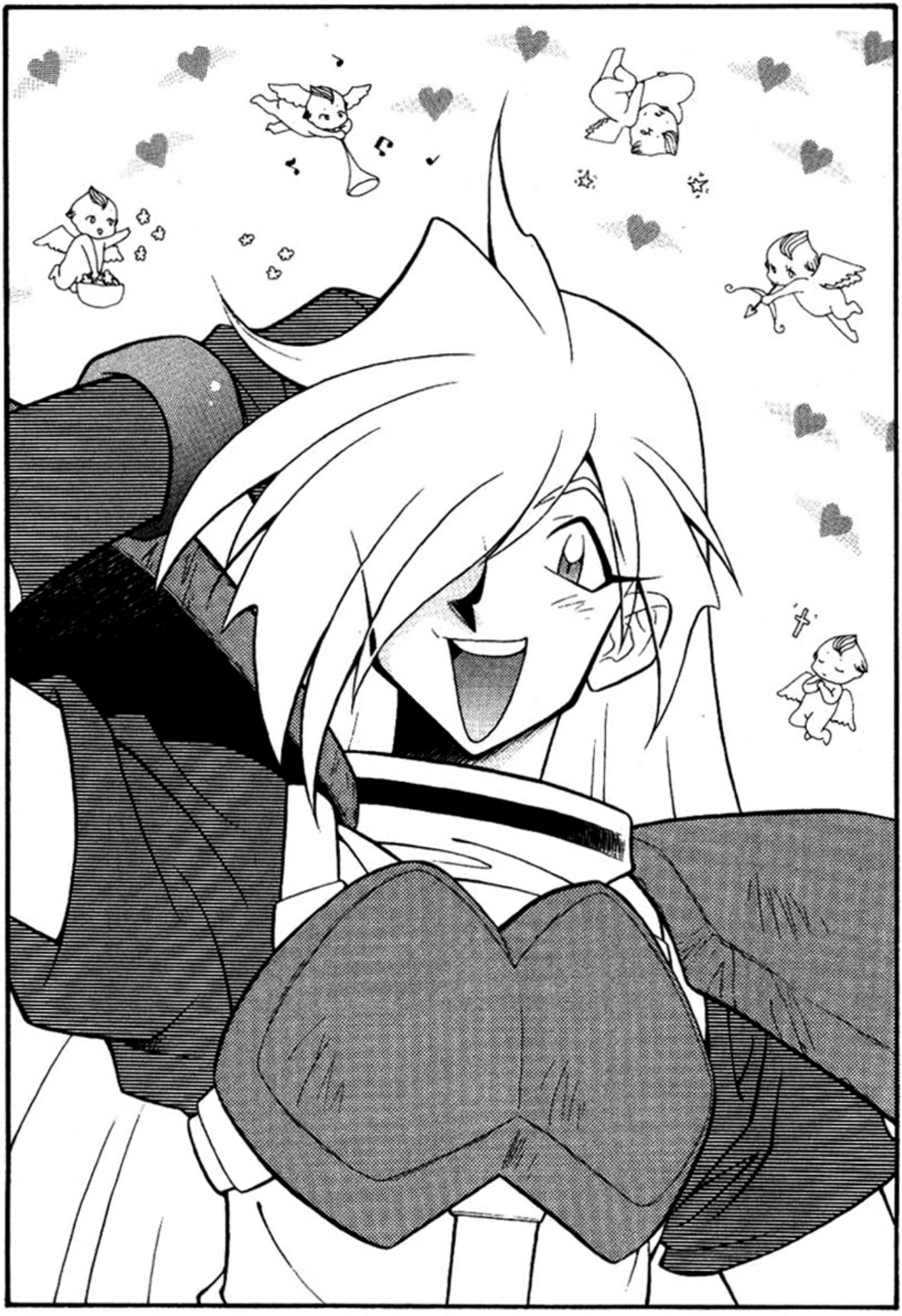
“Well Anyway, I guess that’s the end of that.” Gourry said cheerfully.

God...

“What are you saying? It’s not over until everyone in the castle is at ease. That is, the one’s who aren’t dead anyway.”

“Ugh...” Luke and Milina groaned at that. But Gourry’s face didn’t change.

“Hahaha. That’s silly, Lina. I’m not really good at all that brainwork so I’m out of the loop on this, but for now can’t we just tell people that I got rid of her?”



“You proud bastard!”

I punched Gourry directly in the face.

* * *

“But.. in the end, what was this all about anyway?”

–Some days after the disturbance in the city–

As we were walking down the main road after having left Gyria city, Luke spoke up as if he had suddenly remembered something.

“Sherra had control over the kingdom, but since we beat her, that’ll stop. But, really what was she planning?”

Right. This incident was over. With General Alce taking care of things, Sherra was judged as a spy from another country. That’s how it was treated. Even if we did tell the truth, no one would believe it. Of course, by General Alce smoothing things over, Jade was once again a happy knight. For his deeds– I forgot his name. The one gatekeeper that helped us out was also rewarded. Of course, we were all well compensated for our services too.

...er, how much money counts as fair compensation for fighting a general of Dynast? After all the legalities, General Alce personally resigned. Once again, the kingdom of Dils could continue rebuilding itself. But I wonder what Sherra was scheming. We never did figure that out. Whatever it was, it wasn’t obvious. I mean, was that really Sherra at full power? Before I told Jade, that if Sherra was serious, there wouldn’t be a safe place in this whole city, and I wasn’t exaggerating. But if that was her power, she really wasn’t releasing much. Well, I have a theory that we just crushed her before she could

show her true power. Maybe she thought she could defeat us without going all out. Or she held back because she still wanted control over the King and the country. But what bothers me more than anything...

The moment I cut Sherra with the Ragna Blade. She—*she smiled*. Was that directed at me? Of course I didn't tell anyone about this. Maybe it was just my eyes playing tricks on me.

"But, then, I was thinking and there's something I don't understand..."

"If you were thinking and you actually understood something, then you probably weren't thinking." I played off of Gourry. I can't help it. It's just the way he talks.

"The story's changed but for some reason we're all taking the same road... Where are you guys planning on going from here?"

When he heard that, Luke seemed to have just thought about something, then waved his finger with a tsk-tsk.

"Heh, let me tell you something. We can't travel together. I don't care how tactful you are, you'll be getting in the way of my Love-Love Travel Journey with Milina.

"It's not Love-Lo–"

In the middle of her sentence, Milina froze. The rest of us did as well. Continuing down the road to the east, there was a covered wagon, transporting people to and from the capital city. The forest spread out to the left and right. Within that forest...

Grraaaaarrrr!

A roar rose up!

Fwoosh!

And then a ball of fire came flying out and hit directly in front of the wagon, with the screams and moans of people echoing.

Grrrrrrrrrr...

There came a purring sound, and emerging from the thicket, was a lesser demon! No! Not just one. Another, and then another after that, the figures appeared from within the brush. In the forest, all around us, there were countless presences. A demon horde?! That means... the Sherra incident was unrelated?! But now's not the time to think about that. There are demons surrounding the area and indiscriminately firing off attack spells at people!

"Elmekia Lance!"

My attack took out one of the demons that had been going after a girl, paralyzed with fear.

"Hah!" Gourry yelled as he went running towards the demons, swinging his blade. Luke and Milina attacked with fire spells. But there are too many enemies! And I have no idea how many are left inside the forest. I could go off on my own and make a dynamic move like firing off a dragon slave into the forest, and I would totally do something like that, but we're already completely surrounded. Plainly said, this is a huge pain in the ass! I fire a spell at a demon coming from over there, I fire a spell at a demon coming from over here, I'm steadily wiping them out but more of them just keep coming.

“Dynast Brass!”

From the shade of the trees I could see a face coming out. One more demon to smash–

“H-Help Me!”

I had started chanting my next spell. He suddenly came out and clung to my cape, some middle-aged passerby. Look! I understand why you’d want to depend on me, but you can’t impede my movement like this! But something plunged into my heart and shook it around. Right before my eyes, the tress separated and a Brass Demon appeared! Eek! This is bad! I wasn’t finished chanting my spell! Plus I had an old man clinging to my cape! The Brass demon’s eye’s caught me.

But then a beam of light smashed into it.

After a short delay there came a thunderous roar, and the demons, along with some of the greenery, were blown away. That light... just now... And then it shined again. This attack–The white giant?! I think. I looked in the direction the light had come from. It flashed behind me. In a panic, I looked over my shoulder. It seemed that it hadn’t disturbed any of the trees in the forest.

Without really understanding what was going on, the old man crawled away from me. While it seemed like the giant was only going after the demons, certainly if you got swallowed in its attack, you’d be helpless.

“What the hell is that?!”

“It’s probably the white giant!”

With the sound of the explosion around us, I ran up to Gourry, and yelled a response to his yelled question.

“But there are two bodies!”

“Oh well!”

“Oh well? But...” He said something like that.

“Hey! Is it really okay to run in this direction?!”

“I agree!”

Luke and Milina said as they ran along with us.

“But there are still people...”

“It’s fine!”

As I yelled at Luke I looked around to see that in the nearby vicinity, there was only us four. Everyone else had completely disappeared.

Wha?! When did that happen?! The old jerk who was clinging to my cape, and even the girl who had been crying until now, had energetically picked up and taken off down the main road to the city. Why do we always get the short end of the stick?! Well if that’s how it is, there’s no reason to stay here.

“Okay then! Then let’s run away!”

“But... Lina...”

“What do you mean ‘but,’ Gourry?! If you act like a moron now you’re gonna get shot down!”

“No, it’s just... I think the attack already ended.”

“..... huh?”

Now that you mention it, the sound of the attack from before was gone. And around us there was no longer any trace of the demon’s presence.

“I wonder... if it’s over...”

“It’s over. For now.”

I could hear a voice from within the thicket.

“?!”

Somehow it feels like I’ve heard this voice somewhere before. When I turned and looked toward the rustling brush, a single human form appeared. I knew that face. He was wrapped in loose blue clothes and had blonde hair, a rather attractive older man.

“Mr. Milgazia?!”

If there was a person (sort of) I wasn’t expecting to show up, then it was him. So I unintentionally raised my voice. A while back, when I was involved in another incident, and heading towards the towering Dragon’s peak, that’s when I met the Golden Dragon elder. That was him. Mr. Milgazia. Of course, he’s actually a dragon, but he has the ability to take human form, which is why he looked this way. I get it. The light that took out the demons just now. I was sure it was the white giant but I guess it was the Golden Dragon’s laser breath. However, even though Dragon’s peak isn’t too far away, why is Mr. Milgazia always there?

“I came because I heard a familiar voice. Just as I thought, it was

you. It's been a long time, Human girl. And the human boy as well."

"Yeah. Long time no see." Gourry answered, scratching the back of his head.

"Hey, aren't you gonna say 'I really don't remember him' or something?"

Gourry looked upset by what I'd said. "I remember. He's that big lizard guy with all the free time."

"Can you stop saying 'big lizard'?"

"Uhhhhhhh. Sorry, sorry."

With a serious look, Mr,Milgazia brought his face closer to Gourry's, who in return threw out a hasty apology.

"That's right..." Mr. Milgazia looked in the direction of Luke and Milina. "These two sure have changed since the last time we met."

"Wrong, wrong."

"Different people, different people." Gourry and I said while waving our hands at him.

"I know. It was a joke." he said without once changing his expression.

...dragon humor. I don't get it.

"At any rate, now that this little incident has been put right, I guess things are safe again."

"Yes. Somehow. But..." I looked around the area. "What exactly

happened just now? And why is someone like you, who has never left Dragon's peak, here? It's certainly no trivial matter, but..."

"Mmmm" At my question, Mr. Milgazia let out a little groan and looked toward Luke and Milina.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about those two. They're reliable. They even helped defeat Dynast General Sherra."

"Wha–?!" As expected, Milgazia recoiled a bit at what I had said. "Defeated... and, no... but– You were involved in something like that? And if you survived... hmmm...." He was just saying out loud what he was thinking.

"Hey now, isn't your story there kind of lacking?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a long story so I was going to explain more carefully later." I answered Luke. Eventually. Mr. Milgazia raised his head.

"There's no need to reveal everything, but if that's how things are, maybe there's something I should tell all of you."

"That won't be necessary, Old Mr. Milgazia." A proper-sounding girl's voice came from behind me this time. When I turned and looked that way, the sound of rustling leaves rose up, and within the forest I could see the figure of a woman. She appeared to be around 20 years old, give or take, a beauty with long golden hair. She wore loose blue clothes under really weird looking white light-mail. You couldn't dismiss her appearance, because the way this girl looked didn't reflect her age. Pointed ears, almost translucently white skin. These traits indicated that she was not human, but of the

Elven Race. Having much more magical power than humans, their race has five or six times the life span. Generally they almost never show themselves before humans. So using a simple conversion this girl had probably been living around 100 years. Without paying us any attention she turned to Mr. Milgazia.

"It's useless to speak to the likes of Humans. In fact, the most they can do is cause disorder."

"The 'likes of' humans?" At her words, blue lines ran down Luke's forehead. Of course, she didn't seem to care.

"So says you, Memphy. Those who live on this same earth– they have the right to know. There is no reason to restrict them."

"But–"

"That's what I've decided. I'm speaking to them."

"...yes." At Milgazia's flat delivery, she— Memphy reluctantly nodded.

"Forgive the interruption. The girl isn't too fond of humans."

"So it seems." I said, casually shrugging my shoulders.

The truth is, for a time humans abused members of the elven race. For humans, that's all in the past, but having a lifespan five or six times longer, these things didn't occur 'all in the past.'

"Now how shall I start the story? Needless to say, recently, lesser demons and other low-level Mazoku have been appearing in large numbers in various places. Apparently this was the core movement of Dynast's army. Long ago I once witnessed a situation

exactly like this.”

“Exactly?”

“Yes. The repeated occurrence of demons. It was spread amongst people and taking advantage of that, fighting broke out, gradually creating more mayhem. Everything that happened back then wasn’t a result of Dynast’s scheme, but the situation is the same, which means the goal is probably the same...”

“...and that is...?”

At my question, Mr. Milgazia was silent for a moment. He replied in a heavy tone. “That is... the revival of the Kouma War.”

Afterword

[this translation follows the Afterword for the 2008 reprint of the novels.]

K: And just like that, it ‘s the revised edition! We bring you The Maneuverings of Dynast’s Army!

L: Well, from last afterword to this afterword, we’ve received 40,000 letters saying what sort of activities all you readers have imagined I would do.

K: That many?!! We have releases at the same time! We’re simultaneously releasing three books! We don’t have time for that! That is a 100% blatant lie!

L: Ch. You told.

K: Yes, I told! To begin with how about ‘L vs. a beautiful, nationally famous ryoukan[1] proprietress?’ By that title you can guess the details. Does that mean in the inevitable future you would go to a ryoukan and quarrel with the proprietress? Or a similar development?

L: Ufufu~ You still lack in creativity. In that case! I would prepare for battle! I would kill my master and set out on a journey to find my rival! Hand-to-hand combat and boiled tofu in Kyoto! Appearing somewhere I don’t know in Kobe to hunt cows! Lighting lamps for three days and three nights in the Rokko Mountains! And finally, the ever popular burning in Osaka as a side to my dinner. It will be an intense battle of existence and nothingness! And when I’m in a pinch, my friends will send me away without wavering!

K: They should send you away!

L: I shall prepare for love! I'll travel alone to Kyoto. There, on a hot night of boiled tofu I will casually encounter–

K: Okay, hold on a second. You're confusing the way you describe a battle with the way you describe an erotic novel. And why does everything involve eating boiled tofu?! And when does the beautiful proprietress come in?!

L: It doesn't matter!

K: Doesn't matter?! Then that title doesn't work!

L: It's fine. It's not a huge difference. Only somewhat. Anyway, if I'm going to be traveling to all sorts of inn's with beautiful proprietresses, I have to include the hardships experienced in daily life that come with the battle.

K: What the hell kind of story is that?! Readers, stories aren't just about shaking things up. And is it really okay to combine titles like that?!

L: What's that supposed to mean? If you take your 'Maneuvering's of Dynast's army' You can't not combine it into something like 'The friends of Dynast's underlings felt like there was some sort of Maneuvering, said the Dragon who breathed bad jokes.' In conclusion, that's how I predict future volumes will turn out.

K: ...gh! Actually when writing stories, I don't know how many times I've completed a manuscript and still had to worry about the title. And often if there's a suitable title attached to it, the content doesn't live up to it. This time, the issue is that it's being gathered in an anthology at the same time, so from the table of contents the title should say what it's about. So there are times where you need to worry about it.

L: So it's acceptable as long as the beautiful proprietress appears

for a little while?

K: ...gh! Well, that's probably okay... I'd accept that.

L: Then I'll make it a mystery! During my travels there will be a mysterious murder cases!

K: That's actually pretty generic... Well, it's interesting compared to the ideas you've had until now...

L: And the criminal doesn't even show up until the very end!

K: Hold on! What about the criminal's motive or solving the mystery?!

L: Huh? Why can't I not do that? The investigation should be left to the police.

K: But don't you think that's too normal of a reaction? That's not even a mystery!

L: What are you saying? 'Misuteri' directly translates to 'mystery.'[2] Which means there are a lot of mysteries. Wouldn't you say solving a mystery is someone else's problem?

K: K–! Now that you mention it, a long time ago X-Files was really popular, and I'm pretty sure that was part of the mystery genre! ...but usually the mystery was caused by aliens or mysterious and unconfirmed animals... But wait! If you think about it, if there are murders happening everywhere you go, the clear culprit is you!

L: Are you talking in your sleep again? Under that logic, in almost every detective series, the culprit would be the detective himself, wouldn't it? I only happen upon them by chance. Accidentally. Well, by all means I can make it public. Anyway, at a later date I'd be at the next ryoukan, watching TV as I lay down for bed, and the culprit of the previous murder would be being arrested.

Everything would unfold in the news report, including the killer's motive.

K: There's no climax...

L: Anyway, I was just giving some examples. Dedicated readers, show me what kind of activities you can imagine for me, okay?

K: Examples...? Everyone, don't worry about any of this. She's just getting carried away.

L: Well then everyone, I'll be waiting for your letters~

[1]

Ryoukan is a traditional Japanese style inn.

[2]

During this conversation, they switch back and forth a lot between the words 'misuteri' and 'nazo.' Misuteri refers to the mystery genre specifically and 'nazo' relates to general things that are mysterious, which is why L clarifies that lot's of things are technically mysteries.